

JASON HAMILTON



# AS WINTER SPAWNS

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 6

AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

# **As Winter Spawns**

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Roots of Creation Book 6

# Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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Also by Jason Hamilton

**T**he cold sunk into Jak's body, consuming her right to her bones,

like the stomach acid of a large predator slowly digesting its prey.

The portal shut behind her the moment she passed through it. After Marek had thrown her through, that is. She still couldn't get it through her head. Why had Marek done that? Well, that wasn't exactly the right question. A better question was how had Cain gotten his hands on her best friend and turned him against her. That had to be the explanation. Marek wouldn't betray her of his own volition. Cain was making him do this.

The sun was high in the sky, and Jak had to cover up her eyes as its reflection off a vast field of snow nearly blinded her.

"Jak, what happened? Are you okay?" Seph was clutching her shoulders, giving her a small shake. She blinked as she realized that he was there. She had been so deeply entrenched in her shock that she hadn't even realized what was going on around her.

"I'm..." She almost said 'I'm fine' but quickly realized nothing could be further from the truth. She glanced down at the back of her right arm. There sat a new brand, one she would never have given herself, three circles contained within themselves. A Void brand. The brand to negate all other brands.

Seph saw it too, and his eyes widened. "But how?"

A clink of armor sounded behind Jak, and she turned to see Skellig standing there. "We need to get everyone to the mountains. I don't suppose you could..." she trailed off as she caught sight of the expressions on Jak and Seph's faces, not to mention the fact that they were lying on the snow-covered ground. "What's wrong?"

"Marek betrayed me at the last moment." Jak said. She offered up her arm to show the Void brand. "He gave me this, and took the Pillars."

Seph said nothing but his grip on her arm tightened. Color drained from Skellig's face. She bent closer, lowering her voice. "You can't use your brands?"

Jak felt deep within her, searching for those wells of power that

signaled the presence of a brand. But none existed. She shook her head, slowly.

Skellig took a deep breath and glanced around hastily. "Better keep that covered as best you can. We can't let everyone know that you're defenseless. There will be panic."

Jak agreed, though she knew it wouldn't stay secret for long. Especially when others spotted her without the Pillars of Eternity. Questions would be asked, and speculation could sometimes be worse than the truth. Though how could anything be worse right now? She began to shiver.

"What do we do?" said Seph, bending over to cradle Jak's body and warm it with his own. How come he wasn't so cold? He was just as powerless as Jak.

Skellig faltered for a moment. Jak and Seph joined Skellig in looking at the mass of people who stood ahead of them. Seven thousand people, most of them human, but with a few hundred Fae mixed in. Giant trolls lumbered on around the edges of the group, the only ones who seemed unaffected by the cold.

They were stranded, all of them, on the planet Illadar. Just moments ago Jak had held more power than a human could possibly wield. It had been impossible, something that shouldn't be allowed to happen. Yet she had done it. She had created this very world on which they now stood. But it was only now becoming apparent just how much they still needed magic. Apart from their own group, there was no life visible in any direction. No trees, no animals. Nothing.

All that power that she'd held, gone. She had nothing now. She was as powerless as the morning before receiving her first brand. That had been the day that Cain had first come to see her, though she hadn't known who it was at the time. She'd woken to a dark force in her room that prevented her from moving. She had little more power now.

"I suppose we have to move towards the mountains," Jak struggled to her feet, feeling every muscle protest as she did so. "Find some kind of shelter."

Skellig nodded. "Yes, that should be our first course of action. And we'll need to take stock of our resources. The livestock won't last long in these conditions."

"We'll need them for food," said Jak, though it pained her to say it. But she had grown up raising sheep. There always came a time for the slaughter.

"I suppose so," Skellig surveyed the crowd. Many were drawing closer to them. Eager to know more about what they would do next. Most had excited looks on their faces. They were expecting Jak to have a plan. She had brought them this far after all. They didn't know

that she was suddenly more powerless than they.

“Skellig. You need to take charge,” she said through increasing shivers. “I...I can’t do this right now. Use the gnomes. And find someone to watch out for the Water Fae, to keep the water in their wagons from freezing.”

Skellig didn’t hesitate. She gave the briefest of nods, straightened, and began giving orders.

While Skellig shouted out their next steps, Jak turned to Seph, who still wrapped her in a warm embrace. Well, relatively warm at least. He was shivering too.

“What are you going to do about that?” he said, motioning to where her Void brand was hidden by her sleeve.

“As far as I know, no one has ever removed a brand before. But at least I still have my sanity. I’m not turning into a demon or anything.”

“I suppose that’s something,” said Seph, but his face didn’t look all that relieved. “Perhaps Gabriel could tell you more.”

Jak nodded. “Yes, let’s see if we can find him.” Maybe Gabriel could help. She wouldn’t last long without her powers. And even if she could survive, Cain would come for them eventually, wielding the Pillars of Eternity. Jak had no doubt of that. Cain would find a way to break them, to mold them to his will. And the moment he did, he would wipe this little planet out of the stars. He could do it too. Jak knew all too well the type of power those Pillars contained.

No, she had to get her powers back. That was simply how it must be. She would talk to Gabriel and find a way, no matter what.

Skellig called for the gnomes and Flamedancers to assemble at the front of the army. They didn’t have many. In fact, most of their seven thousand people did not have brands, since they came from far distant countries. But there were a handful of Flamedancers. Together with the gnomes, they began clearing the snow in front of them.

To Jak’s relief, at least one gnome remained with each wagon carrying a Water Fae. Those particular wagons were covered in pitch, to help them hold water. The gnomes used their Fae abilities to keep the water warm, and prevent freezing. Inside these wagons lay the Water Fae, immobile due to their giant tail fin instead of legs. Jak scanned the horizon to find evidence of a lake or other body of water, but saw none. And even if there were a lake, it would be completely frozen over, rendering it useless for the Water Fae.

Another shiver ran down Jak’s spine as she imagined the feeling of warm water surrounding her. She couldn’t imagine anything would feel so good right at that moment.

A few humans and Fae came up to her asking for advice, but she turned them away, making sure they knew that Skellig was in charge for now. She hid her Void brand with one hand anytime someone



approached. They couldn't know that she was defenseless. Not yet. Not until they found some kind of stable living conditions.

Seph stayed with her, and they hovered around the back of the group once they began to move towards the mountains. It felt good to be moving. But those mountains were still at least a day's march, and they might not have sunlight for all that time. Jak didn't even want to think about what temperatures would be at night.

She looked up at the sky. Clouds dispersed the light in all directions so she couldn't pinpoint exactly where the sun was at that moment. Did the sun even set the same as on Earth? What if the day and night cycle lasted much longer, or shorter? What if there wasn't even a day and night cycle?

Soon enough, her need to find Gabriel overcame her desire to lie low in the back of the group. She began pushing ahead with Seph right behind her. Gabriel had been the first to go through the portal, so he might be near the front. Though with seven thousand humans, she didn't find him quickly.

Finally, she spotted the tip of a long, brown beard sticking out of a worn hood.

"Gabriel!" she shouted and pushed past the few who were in her way.

Her mentor turned his head sharply at the forcefulness of her call. Maybe she shouldn't have sounded so desperate. Others were looking at her as well. Almost unconsciously, she lay a hand over her sleeve above the Void brand.

"What is it, Jak?" Gabriel said as she drew close, with Seph following right behind her.

Jak glanced from side to side, making sure no one was listening too closely. "We have a problem." She lifted up her sleeve just enough to expose the Void brand on her arm, close enough so that only she and Gabriel could see it.

Gabriel's eyes widened, and he too began glancing this way and that, looking for eavesdroppers. Thankfully most seemed fixated on putting one foot in front of the other in the snow-laden terrain.

"What happened?" he said, in a low but harsh tone. "You didn't do that to yourself, did you?"

"No," Jak felt her stomach clench again. "It was Marek."

She filled Gabriel in as much as she dared considering they were still out in the open. Seph chimed in only to mention the moment when Marek had flung him through the portal, just before branding Jak and sending her through as well. Gabriel stared at the ground as they walked, but it was clear he was listening intently.

"And you can't use any of your brands?" he asked once she finished. Jak shook her head. Gabriel took a deep breath and let it out

slowly.

“Do you know anything about removing brands?”

Gabriel’s face darkened. “Jak, do you remember the first time we met?”

Jak thought back to that day. The day when she’d received her first brand. “Yes. You skipped over me at the branding and talked to me privately afterward.”

“And you remember I asked you about Salizon’s constants?”

Jak’s face drained of color. She did remember. “You’re talking about the third constant. Permanence.”

Gabriel nodded. “Once you receive a brand, it stays with you for life.”

“But, you know perfectly well that the first constant has already been disproven.” Jak pleaded. “Singularity. We’ve learned that people can have multiple brands now.”

Gabriel nodded, “True, and that’s why I would encourage you to search for an answer. You broke the first constant, maybe you can find a solution to the third.”

“You mean, you don’t know of anything that could take away the brand?” Jak’s heart sunk further. Gabriel was her only hope. He knew everything, but if he didn’t know this...

“I’m sorry, Jak. I can be of no help to you.”

“But...what about tearing the skin off, or burning it, or...or trying another Void brand to Void the original brand.”

Gabriel pursed his lips. “That last one is new, but the others have all been tried. They failed. The branding is more than skin deep. What you see is its outward appearance, but there is something about the brand that becomes a part of your very soul. It cannot simply be removed by physical means.”

“But the second Void brand idea?” Jak prodded. She’d take any possibility, however slight. She had to get her powers back.

But the expression on Gabriel’s face did not look encouraging. “I would doubt it could work. Even if you found someone to give you a brand, which let’s remember you were the only one who could give multiple brands, I don’t think it would work.”

“Why not?”

“Well, mostly because you’d have to differentiate between brands. You would want your second Void brand to only affect the first, rendering it useless and therefore freeing the others. But it wouldn’t work that way. A second Void brand would continue to negate the effects of all brands.”

“What can I do?” Jak asked, desperate. There had to be something. Some wild theory or an old book she could read to learn more.

Gabriel stopped walking and turned to look her square in the eye.

Jak did not like what she saw there. "I'm sorry, Jak. I don't think there's anything we can do to bring your powers back. Though there is one person who knows brands more than I."

"Who is it?" Jak asked eagerly.

"Cain," said Gabriel. "You've already told me about the mind control brand he used on your shackles in Mt. Harafast. Perhaps there are other brands we don't know about."

"You're kidding, right? There's no way I could get that kind of information out of him. Besides, we're trapped on this planet."

Gabriel shrugged and went back to walking. "I didn't say it would be possible to learn from him, only that he might be the only person who knows a solution."

"But that's not useful to me at all!" Jak began to feel a heat rise up inside of her. A few people glanced at her, and she did her best to calm down. It was not easy.

"I have a question," said Seph in a matter-of-fact tone, almost as if he hadn't heard their conversation. Both she and Gabriel turned their heads to look at him. "Does your Void brand work?"

"What do you mean?" Jak narrowed her eyes at Seph. "Of course it works, I can't use any of my other brands."

"No, sorry. I mean, does it work on other people? People with Void brands can usually touch someone and negate their powers, right?"

He was right. The Royal Priest of Skyecliff had once done just that to Jak. He'd touched her and she'd temporarily lost her gifts.

"We can give it a try," said Gabriel, holding his left hand aloft. The Gifter brand on the back of that hand lit up. "Go ahead and touch my hand, Jak. If your Void brand works, we will know it immediately."

This wasn't going to help her get her powers back, but she was still curious. It would be nice to have something at least. Some ability to call her own, even if she couldn't draw from any of the others. She reached out and placed her right arm on Gabriel's wrist.

Immediately, the light coming out of Gabriel's brand died. Her mentor's eyes widened. "Well that settles it. I can't use my brand at all, right now."

Jak let go, staring once again at the Void brand on her arm. "Well, not that it will do me much good, but..."

"I think it could do a lot of good," said Seph. "This could be the key to defeating Cain if he ever comes against us again."

"You think I could use a Void brand against him?" asked Jak, cocking her head at Seph.

"Yes, and then he would be nothing but an ordinary man. He could be defeated."

"That actually sounds like a decent plan," said Gabriel, nodding. "I'm not sure why we hadn't thought of that before."

Jak agreed but didn't find any solace in the idea. She hadn't asked for a Void brand after all. She wanted her other brands back. Besides, with Cain still on Earth, the chances of her getting a chance to use her Void brand on him were so small they might as well assume it wasn't possible.

She looked away at the mountains that slowly towered over them more and more as they drew closer. What would they do if she didn't get her brands back and they also couldn't find shelter? Would they all die out here, exposed to the cold like they were?

This was why they needed her abilities. Before, she could have made them all Flamedancers or given them Toughness to help cope with the cold. But she couldn't do any of that right now. They had come to Illadar expecting her to take care of them. But all they had found here was cold and ruin.

She was a failure.

“T hanks for your help, Gabriel,” she said before hurriedly

pushing past him and towards the head of their group. If finding suitable shelter was the key to their immediate survival, then she wanted to be at the forefront of the group, helping however she could.

She didn’t watch to see if Seph was following her, but she was vaguely aware that he did so. Together they moved towards the edge of the crowd. She needed space.

“Jak,” he said from behind. “I just want you to know that you will get through this. We haven’t made it this far just to fail.”

Despite herself, she whipped around to glare at Seph. “You can’t possibly expect me to just lie down and take this. You don’t know what it’s like to have everything you are taken from you. I not only lost my brands, I’ve lost everything! My mother, the Pillars, my friend! And without my brands, I’m essentially useless.”

“Is that what you think?” Seph said, his voice soft.

Jak stopped herself from saying more. She’d forgotten that Seph didn’t have any brands either. “No...I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that you were useless.”

“But in a sense, you’re right. There is little I have to offer. I can’t scout like a Sightseer, fight like a Flamedancer, heal myself, or any of the things that others can do with their brands.”

“Yeah, but you’re half the reason for everyone coming together. You and your book, and what you preach. It gives people hope. For me, my powers *were* what inspired others.”

Seph bit his lip as if pondering her words. “Perhaps this will be an opportunity for you to discover something more about yourself.”

Jak furrowed her brow. “I’m sure that will help us survive here, or fight Cain if he ever shows up again.”

“You never know.” Seph shrugged. But just then, Jak noticed that everyone was staring at them, or pretending not to stare but obviously listening. Jak closed her eyes. Her and her big mouth. Now word would quickly spread that she was essentially helpless. Though it wouldn’t have taken long for that message to spread anyway. Might as

well get it over with.

She scanned the faces of those who had overheard. Most were trying hard to avoid meeting her eyes, but some kept glancing in her direction, slightly hysterical expressions on their faces. They were afraid. The reality of their situation was beginning to take hold. Jak felt it too.

She went back to focusing on the snow-covered path ahead of her. Though she couldn't see the sun through the cloud-covered sky, light was fading, and temperatures were dropping. They would need to find shelter soon or set up camp here and hope the Flamedancers and gnomes could keep the air around them warm enough for all to survive.

Indeed, it wasn't long before Skellig called a halt, then ordered the gnomes and Flamedancers to move ahead of the rest of the army, to clear an area of snow. Jak watched as the gnomes heated the rock beneath the snow, and Flamedancers shot jets of fire in all directions. Steam hissed and even at a distance, the warmth caused goose pimples to rise on Jak's flesh. Soon nothing but wet rock remained, and with a little more effort that water rose into the air as fresh steam, leaving the land dry.

The gnomes continued to move forward, repeating the same steps on the adjacent patch of land, and beyond. They would need to cover a large enough area for seven thousand people to stay the night. A gnome had a large reach with their powers of heat, but there were only a few dozen of them.

"I'm not sure I like this," said a voice. Jak turned to see not Seph but Vander, the newly elected leader of the Shadow Elves standing next to her. Where had Seph gone?

"Like what?" Jak said, glad to have Vander nearby. They'd had their differences before, but right now Vander was the closest reminder she had of her mother. He probably knew Karlona far better than she did, since he had lived with her for years in the Hollow Peaks.

Vander kept staring out at the dry patches ahead of them. "This," he waved his hand in the direction of the gnomes. "Using one of the races for work like this."

"We'd all die without their help. The Flamedancers are there as well," she pointed out.

"Yes, but it still bothers me," he said. "We Fae used to be the majority in our little group, but now there are thousands of other humans here as well. What do we do if they suddenly decide we work for them?"

Jak was about to say something when Vander seemed to forget his concern and turned to her with a caring look on his face.

“But I shouldn’t bother you with such words,” he said. “How are you? I hear you lost your abilities.” He didn’t seem worried or scared like the others. If anything, he looked more concerned for her.

“Word travels fast. I’ll be looking for a way to fix it,” said Jak. “There’s got to be a way.”

“But the effect that must have had on you. And so shortly after losing your mother.”

Jak nodded. “It’s been a lot to process.”

“I don’t think I would still be standing,” said Vander, patting her on the back. “You show great resilience.”

“I don’t feel resilient,” said Jak.

“I’m sure none of the great ancestors of legend felt they were anything special either. But I and the Shadow Elves will continue to consider you as one of our own. We do not put our faith in someone based on the number of brands they have.”

Jak smiled. “Thank you, Vander. I will try not to let you down.”

“Just keep searching for answers, and I’m sure they will come.” Vander patted her on the back once again. “But in the meantime, I have to go make sure that my people are appropriately accommodated for the night.”

And with that, he retreated back through the crowd, leaving Jak alone once more. And just as well, because it wasn’t long after that when Skellig ordered everyone to move into the drier terrain and make camp for the night. They had tents, but most were assigned to bundle together with several others. It was close quarters for Jak, but she understood the need. They would need body heat to survive the night with the temperatures dropping the way they were.

Thank the ancestors for Skellig. The woman didn’t miss a beat once. She continued giving orders and checking up on each of the various factions within the group. There were a lot of them. The foreigners they had found in the valley led by the Triad: Bretton, Li, and Mosaial. Each of the various Fae species, and a few other human recruits, most of whom were either followers of Seph, or Watchers that had come with Jak from Mt. Harafast. They were all here.

The next step was to arrange for food to be passed out among them. This was mostly provided by the Triad’s foreign companies who had spent years preparing for an expedition they could only guess was coming. They had enough food for everyone, not to mention a massive supply of still-living livestock.

Jak graciously accepted some dried meat as it was passed out. She chewed on it absently for a while. The others left her alone for the most part. Most didn’t even look at her. By now, word had spread that she had failed them as a leader. She had created this world for them, led them to it, only to discover that the world was an icy wasteland,

and to have her power to do anything about it stripped away from her.

So she ate in relative silence, savoring the food as she realized just how hungry she had become. Before, her Hungerless brand had staved off the need for regular food. But now she would need to eat every day like everyone else. There were several others of the company with a Hungerless brand, but few in comparison to how many were here.

They would have to find a new source of food fast, or they were all goners.

The sound of someone speaking brought her out of her thoughts. She turned towards the sound and saw someone standing on a wagon, his arms out and speaking to the crowd around him while they ate. But in the dimming light, she couldn't quite make out who it was.

She moved closer. It was probably a dissenter, someone who had found out what happened to her. Probably blaming her for bringing them to Illadar, for creating a place that defied all of their expectations.

But it wasn't. When she was close enough she recognized the man's posture, and a familiar voice drifted to her.

"And so I thought it best to speak about the Guiding Hand today, that force that brought us here, and that will, in time, help us survive and come out of it even stronger than we were. Hopefully I can teach something new to those of you who have not heard my sermons before, and provide a refreshed understanding for those who have."

There were a few disgruntled mutters throughout the crowd. But most were listening. Most of the audience within earshot were the foreigners, judging by their appearance. But there were a few faces Jak recognized, and a few Fae as well.

"There are difficulties ahead for us," said Seph. "I'm not going to say otherwise. And I cannot promise that deliverance, at least of our physical form, will be there for all. But we can gain some measure of comfort in knowing that we're not alone. There is a great destiny ahead for our people. We must assume that we will not perish completely."

"But there's nothing here to eat," said one person. A chorus of agreement ran through the crowd. The few closest to her shot her distrustful glances.

"Yeah! And we can't survive out here in this cold for long," said another. "We were happy in that valley and you led us here to die!"

That provoked an even greater chorus of hostile agreement. Jak swallowed. Was Seph unwittingly provoking a riot? What would he do, or rather what would *she* do, if the people were to rise up against them? Her brands were useless to her if she was attacked. She began taking a few quiet steps backward, slowly turning away.



“I want you all to imagine for a moment,” Seph continued. Jak faced him again. He looked completely unphased by the crowd. If anything, he looked even more excited. “I want you to imagine these lands covered with greenery and life, of a land rich in minerals and tilling soil, where there is enough for human, Fae, and beast alike. But more importantly, I want you to imagine a culture where human and Fae work together for the betterment of all, and where we serve each other so that no one need go hungry or without shelter from the elements.”

People were starting to listen now, some even leaned in to better hear what Seph would say next. Jak too was carried across the world of imagination as she envisioned the land as Seph described it. It was beautiful, lush, and peaceful. But was it even possible?

As if sensing her words, one of the others cried. “You talk but how can we even begin to have a life like that under our present circumstances.”

Seph thought on that for a while before speaking. “I’d like to tell you a story,” he said. “Of a time after I found a certain book, the Book of Illadar. In it, I read many things I considered most strange. I read of humans becoming something else, changing into forces of nature. I read of a world of peace and prosperity for these beings, who would live beside humans and prosper together. At the time, I thought it was highly far-fetched, even after all I had seen that led me to the book. How could such things be possible? I admit that even I had serious doubts at that time. I began to form a following, but many looked to me for answers that I did not have. I had only to trust that the book was true.”

His eyes roamed across the crowd until they landed on Jak. A smile formed on his lips, that dazzling smile that used to fill her with so much delight, and now it filled her with love.

He kept his eyes on her while he spoke again, “And then I met a young girl, reading in a library. We talked and I learned about the Fae. I learned that much of what was spoken of in the Book of Illadar had already come to pass. I learned that not only was that girl a messenger to me of the fulfillment of prophecy, but she was prophecy herself.”

Jak’s face drooped. Why was he focusing on her? She could no longer be a leader of these people. Not without her brands. Sure, Seph was right that the book had prophesied of her. The evidence was too perfect to ignore. But all that was over. She had created Illadar like the book had said, but it said nothing of her role beyond that. That had to be because Jak had no role after that. Her part was over.

She fully expected someone to call Seph out on this, but to her surprise, no one said a word. They were listening to Seph’s story. And

so he continued. "It wasn't until that time that I truly came to believe the prophecies. By following the council I had been given, I was led to its truth. And the prophecies are not done. There is still much left to do."

A few mutters of "what more" or "what can we do" ran through the crowd. Jak stared at them in amazement. Moments ago they had been angry at Seph, and angry at her. Now they were begging to hear more of Seph's knowledge. Even she wanted to continue listening. What had changed?

"There are yet more Fae to come," said Seph. "The book speaks of twelve races, including humans. We have yet to see four of them. It may be these four races will be the key to our survival, or perhaps they will come once we have established peace. We cannot know for sure. But for those of you who think Illadar is done being formed, think again. The formation of Illadar was not an event, it is a process, one in which we must all participate."

A few heads nodded, and even Jak felt encouraged. There was something about Seph, something in his posture or the way he spoke. He truly believed that what he spoke was true. That much was evident in his enthusiasm and confidence. Perhaps they would find a way to survive after all.

"The Guiding Hand will put us through many trials. But only because we learn much from those trials. We will grow stronger, and develop a more sure foundation on this planet. It might not look like much now, but it is ours. Ours to shape, ours to till, ours to mine. We will make it through these trying times because we must. And in doing so we will develop the mightiest nation either world has ever seen, one that survived the worst that could be thrown at it, and spat in the face of adversity."

This time, it wasn't a chorus of murmurs that ran through the crowd, but a chorus of cheers. Seph was doing it. He was motivating them, getting them excited about surviving. Perhaps they even had a chance at doing so. Seph was a natural leader. Perhaps he would be the best choice to replace Jak in the end.

After the speech, Seph wandered back to her, shaking hands as he went and speaking a few kind words to some of the more tired-looking individuals. Jak watched him draw near, her arms folded to retain heat, but with admiration in her eyes. As soon as Seph came close enough, she grabbed him by the coat and pulled him into a kiss.

“**T**hat was amazing,” Jak said when she finally pulled away

from the kiss. “You somehow managed to keep them from turning into a mob.”

“I only deliver the words required of me,” said Seph. She stifled a frown. Couldn’t he accept praise for once in his life?

“Well whatever you did, you’ve kept them sane for now. And word of this will spread.”

“Perhaps, but there are so many here. I tried to find a place where I could speak to as many as I could, but my voice doesn’t carry far enough to speak to all.”

Jak lay her head on his chest, and he responded by wrapping his arms around her. She felt her muscles relax and her flesh tingle as they shared the warmth from their bodies. It seemed that the absence of her brands made his embrace even more comforting.

“You can speak to more of them tomorrow,” said Jak, glancing at the sky and the waning light. The cloud layer was still so thick it was difficult to know in what direction the sun lay. But regardless, their light was nearly gone.

“I’m sure I will. It’s probably best if I make my sermons a regular thing again. I think I’d like that. I haven’t preached regularly since I was in Skyecliff.”

Skellig began making the rounds, riding on a horse from one end of the camp to another. “Stay close together for warmth tonight,” she shouted. “Gnomes and Flamedancers will take periodic shifts to heat the stone enough to keep everyone from freezing. But we have no fuel for fires, so stick together and share blankets.”

Jak glanced at Seph as Skellig rode away to continue the message. “So...um, want to share a blanket?” she felt the blood rush to her cheeks. While she had known that they would need to sleep close together with everyone around them, she hadn’t thought about those sleeping arrangements involving Seph. Despite their blossoming relationship they had never...

He smiled. “Well it was the major’s orders.”

She smiled back, feeling her embarrassment drain away for an edge of...excitement. She was still blushing though. Both her father and mother had cautioned her to reserve the more intimate part of herself for someone who was truly worth it, and with whom she would want to spend the rest of her life. Did she want that with Seph? Were they even ready for that?

Perhaps she was thinking about it too much, but the thoughts persisted as they settled down for bed that night. She and Seph ended up together, and Jak felt her blush only increase as Seph put his arms around her as they lay. But nothing would happen of course. There was a soldier on her other side as well, and a Bright Elf beyond that. Everyone was huddled together.

Maybe it was the nearby Bright Elf's light that kept her awake, or maybe it was the cold, but she found herself awake for a long time, despite her exhaustion, long after Seph's deep breathing indicated he was asleep behind her.

Would she want to spend her life with Seph? Perhaps, now that she had lost her brands and was essentially no longer the leader of the group, perhaps they could find solace together. They could go off and live a quiet life. Maybe raise sheep like her father had done. If they could find a way to keep the sheep and themselves alive long enough for that to happen. That was a good thought. A really good thought. There had been a time when all she wanted was to leave Riverbrook, go to Skyecliff and learn everything she could. Now...well now a boring life was far more attractive. Particularly if Seph could be there with her.

The feel of Seph's warm body behind her, his chest rising and falling as he slept, combined with her exhaustion of traveling this far after losing her brands, finally put her to sleep.



THE NEXT MORNING she awoke to the sound of Skellig's horse riding again up and down the perimeter. "Wake up!" she yelled. "The temperature is rising and we will have to move fast to reach the mountains before it drops again."

She continued shouting these words as she went down the line. Eyes opened and people began removing themselves from the blankets.

A soft kiss on Jak's cheek from behind told her that Seph was awake. She adjusted herself so that she was facing him. "Hey," she said.

"Hi," he replied, reaching a hand out to stroke her raven hair. "I

hope you slept well.”

“Not bad, considering,” though even as she said it, she remembered the feeling of refreshment that she had enjoyed from a combination of her Strength, Healing, and Sleeplessness brands. Nothing compared to that.

Seph must have noticed her faltering gaze because he cupped her cheek in his hand and said, “We’ll get through this, Jak. It might be hard, and I don’t know if you’ll get your powers back or not. But we will get through this. The Fae will survive.”

Jak smiled. “I hope you’re right.”

She kissed him deeply, or at least as deeply as she felt comfortable doing in front of everyone else. He kissed her back, moving the hand on her cheek to grasp the back of her neck. When they came apart, Jak smiled. Maybe they could enjoy some time alone together after they found a more permanent place to stay.

“I like—” Seph glanced upward as though thinking of something to say. “—what we have going here,” he finished anticlimactically.

“I do too,” she said. “I think I’d like this to continue.”

He nodded, “I know I would. I hope last night didn’t make you uncomfortable.”

She thought that through and shrugged, “At first maybe but it was nice.”

“I promise not to do anything that would cause discomfort,” he said, his face still touched with concern. “Can we agree not to rush into anything?”

Jak nodded. “With everything else that’s happening, I think that would be for the best.”

“Okay, I...I think I’d like that though. Being with you I mean.”

Everyone around them was on their feet by this point, which Jak only now realized. She pushed herself up to her knees and then to her feet, offering a hand to Seph so he could do the same.

“Later,” she said. “Let’s focus on surviving first. Then we can talk about...the future I guess.”

He smiled that amazing smile of his. “Well I guess that gives us some good motivation to survive.” Then he leaned in and kissed her one more time.

Jak almost felt her knees give way, but this time it wasn’t from exhaustion. Relics, she loved this man. She held the kiss as long as she dared before breaking away and helping the others pack up what few belongings had been needed for the night. Seph joined right in beside her.

They traveled for most of the day. The sun had finally appeared above them, looking no different than it had on Earth, though Jak was acutely aware that they were millions of miles away, on the other side

of the Sun. Just the thought was going to take some getting used to.

But almost everyone began shouting in a panic as the sky suddenly darkened. When Jak looked up, she spied something moving in front of the sun, an enormous shape. It was a moon, but one far larger than what Jak was used to seeing on Earth. She vaguely remembered creating that moon. But the momentary eclipse did not last long. The moon moved out of range, and the sun shone bright again.

With the improved visibility, the Sky Fae began flying ahead to scout out the mountains and find caves, an overhang, or some other suitable shelter. At Vander's request, they even carried a few of the Shadow Elves to drop them off by the mountains so they could scout along the ground, something the Sky Fae would admit they were not particularly good at doing.

Seph and Jak stayed together, and thankfully few came up to Jak to ask for help or inspiration. News had traveled fast that she was no longer in possession of the abilities she'd used to dramatic effect. And while some still came to her with faith-filled eyes, begging her to tell them that everything would be okay, most left her alone.

In fact, more people were coming to Seph over the course of the day. He continued giving his brief sermons every time they stopped for a break, and they tried to move forward or backward within the expedition so he could speak to a different group every time. Jak followed but never participated. And most did not look to her. Quite the opposite sometimes. Every once in a while she caught someone stealing a pained or hurtful glance in her direction.

But not long after the sun had climbed to its peak and begun to fall back down, they drew closer to the mountain and met one of the Shadow Elf scouts there. By this time, Jak and Seph were closer to the front of the exodus, and saw the scout speak to Vander first, with Skellig joining them. Had they found something?

With a glance at Seph, Jak began trotting forward to meet with Vander and Skellig. The scout was there too, a Shadow Elf by the name of Viona.

"What is it?" Jak said as they pulled close enough to speak to her fellow council members.

"We found some caves," said Vander, though his face did not look as elated as Jak would have expected.

"That's great news," said Jak.

"There's a problem," said Viona, the scout.

Skellig explained. "It's not big enough for all of us. Which we should have expected. No caves are big enough for seven thousand."

"The Hollow Peaks were," said Vander. "There used to be a lot more of us living there before many of us found death at the hands of humans and demons."

Seph spoke from behind Jak. "So we take shifts in the caves and send more scouts up and down the mountainside to find other suitable shelters."

Vander glanced at Seph, and Jak wasn't sure she liked his expression, "I suppose you'll want us and the other Fae to help with that?"

"Not exclusively, no," said Seph carefully. "I'm sure there will be plenty of the rest of us who are willing."

"Yes, most of whom will have no brands," replied Vander. Jak narrowed her eyes at the Shadow Elf. What was he implying about people without brands?

"We already have what few Gifters we have branding those who want one," said Skellig. "With priority to Flamedancers and Hungerless."

Jak turned to Skellig. She hadn't known that. There weren't many Gifters in their camp. Probably only two or three besides Gabriel. But they should be able to brand at least a hundred people per day between them. That was a good start. Perhaps she could help...

Then she remembered, and her excitement sunk into the void in her gut. She couldn't help with the branding. Not ever again. Not unless she could find a way to remove the Void brand, and the chances of that happening were looking slimmer and slimmer.

"Well, if we Fae are some of your greatest assets," Vander continued. "Perhaps we should get priority in those caves. There is enough room for all of the Fae together. And the Water Fae won't survive long in the open."

Skellig narrowed her eyes at Vander. "That would hardly be fair."

"We would allow certain of the humans to come as well, those who were least expendable like your Gifters."

Now Jak narrowed her eyes as well. "We would allow?" What had prompted Vander to say that? It sounded as if he intended to take over the caves and not let anyone else in.

"We will take turns in the caves until we can find additional dwellings, and that's final," said Skellig. "We will not indulge in conversations about who deserves what. Everyone gets an equal opportunity."

Vander scowled. "We found the caves for you. You owe us."

Skellig took a step toward the Shadow Elf. "We all work together on this or everything falls apart. Is that understood?"

Vander met Skellig's eyes, stare for stare. They were of equal height, and that only added to the tension. Jak rubbed her arms trying to appease the chill running down her spine. It wasn't a chill brought on by the cold. Viona looked equally uncomfortable.

"Perhaps we should decide once we get there?" Jak suggested.

Both Skellig and Vander turned their heads to face her. She stopped herself from taking one step back at the sour looks on their faces. "I mean, we still have time before we arrive. Perhaps we'll find more shelter along the way."

"You mean, *we'll* find more shelter," said Vander, clearly emphasizing himself and the other Fae.

"I think it's a good idea," said Viona. "It didn't take us long to find these caves. We might find more in the meantime."

Vander hesitated, but nodded in the end. "I can agree to that. And we can rotate enough people through the caves for a while at least. Until we can find something more suitable, assuming we do."

Jak refrained from asking him what he would do if they didn't find something more suitable. She didn't want to antagonize him further. He was understandably stressed. He hadn't even been in charge of the Shadow Elves until Karlona, Jak's mother, had died. That had only happened a few days ago, though already it felt like a lifetime to Jak. So much had happened since then, yet the pain was still fresh.

Skellig brought Jak out of her thoughts by speaking again to Vander. "We understand that we're placing a lot of the responsibility for our survival on the Fae. I apologize for that. We'll send out some human scouts as well, and make sure the Flamedancers take the load off of the gnomes as much as possible."

Vander grunted an acknowledgement. Well that was something at least.

But Viona continued to look uncomfortable, and Jak could understand. Despite his agreement, Vander bore an expression that suggested he had other things in mind.



Skellig followed up on her words, sending out a team of scouts led by Bretton, one of the Triad leaders.

"I'm used to cold survival situations," Bretton said to Skellig, with a wink at Jak who stood behind her. Jak smiled. It was a bit of a long story, but when she'd gone back in time as part of her test to gain a Pillar of Eternity, she'd met Bretton as a young boy, nearly frozen to death in some northern forest.

"I'll make sure you have at least one Flamedancer with you," said Skellig. "Only one though. Most are needed here."

"Understood," said Bretton. "How many men do you need?"

"As many as you can spare. I'd like you to go along the mountains to our left, easy I guess, and search there. I'll have others searching the base of the mountains to the right."

Bretton gave a crisp salute and began walking off. However, he paused as if considering saying something else. Then he turned and faced Jak. "I just want you to know that those of my clan have not given up faith in you."

Jak blinked. She hadn't expected anyone to say something like that to her. "Uh...thank you"

"If there's anything my life has taught me, it's that hardship breeds strength. We, my people, have learned to welcome it. I have no doubt that we will come out of this alive and stronger than ever."

That would be nice, but Jak wasn't sure how it applied to her. After all, there was no denying that she had been stronger with her brands. Literally. Her Strength brand had made her far stronger than she was now. Sure, hardship helped you to grow. She'd experienced that during the time after the death of her father. But when that hardship involved losing all of the power that you needed to save multiple races...she wasn't sure how she, or the rest of them for that matter, were going to survive in the long term.

But instead of voicing her doubts, she merely said. "Thank you, Bretton." Bretton returned her thanks with a slight bow before heading off to collect his men.

Jak watched as the man left, and Skellig began giving orders to keep moving. Soon they were traveling once again towards the mountains and the caves they harboured. This time Jak stayed with

Skellig near the front. She no longer led, but at least she would be among the first to know if the scouts found anything else.

It felt good to be moving, but Jak couldn't help but think about Cain and what he might be doing back on Earth. He had the Pillars of Eternity now, and while she didn't think they would respond to him at first, she had no doubt he would find a way. Then what would happen? Would he simply snuff them out of the sky? Did it even matter that they try to survive, if only to die later? And what about Naem and all those he recruited, still left on Earth? What would happen to them? She had originally planned on going back and forth between the two worlds, taking as many as would come. But now all of that was out of the question.

Seph stayed beside her, occasionally putting his hand in hers as they walked. That was nice. He was the only comfort during this whole fiasco. Though if Cain managed to get the Pillars to work, it wouldn't matter anyway. They'd both be dead.

Even at their slow pace, it only took a few more hours before Jak could see some of the Shadow Elves gathered at the base of the nearest mountain foothills. Though it was all covered in white snow, Jak could still make out a cleft in the rock, like a small canyon between two of the foothills. She couldn't see where it led, as the path turned sharply, but this had to be the entrance. It was incredible that even the sharp eyes of the Shadow or Sky Fae had managed to find it.

A chorus of relieved and tired moans echoed behind her as more people saw what must be the entrance to the caves. More mutters continued as word spread back through their large exodus. The end of their long journey was finally coming to a close.

Vander strode forward to meet with the others of his race, then waved Skellig over. Jak followed, curious to overhear. Just because she was no longer in charge didn't mean she couldn't be privy to such important conversations.

"My comrades estimate there's enough room in there to hold about a thousand people," said Vander as soon as they caught up to him.

"Good," said Skellig. "I had hoped for more, but that is still enough to ensure everyone gets at least one day in seven."

"Somewhat less than that, I would think," said Vander.

"What do you mean?" said Skellig, a hint of warning in her voice. She had not forgotten their little disagreement earlier.

"Well, some will need to live there more permanently," said Vander. "The Water Fae for instance. We can't keep the water in their wagons from freezing over unless they're inside. Most of the gnomes will need to be inside as well, to keep the place warm. And any returning scouts should get priority, among others."

"Very well," said Skellig, though she said it slowly, as if she were

trying to think of other options. "We will do what we can to rotate everyone else through. But we can start with the Water Fae and gnomes as you suggest."

Vander gave a satisfied nod and gave a brief order to the rest of the Shadow Elves who followed him. They retreated through the cleft, around the corner and, presumably, into the caves.

Jak narrowed her eyes at Vander as he walked away. Why was he leading the Shadow Elves into the caves? Shouldn't they be helping? Though she could agree that scouts should get some priority in the caves, and Vander's team had been scouting for them.

Skellig paused to consider this as well, but in the end she must have decided to ignore it for now. Instead, she began barking orders to set up camp outside the caves, and to send for the wagons with the Water Fae, so they could be brought in first.

Gnomes and Flamedancers began drying out the area as they once had, heating up the ground and spewing fire at the snow. Jak watched the rock slowly reveal itself from underneath the snow. There was nothing there but bare stone. No plants, nothing to indicate life had ever existed on this world. Until now.

When they went inside, Jak was surprised at how much of a difference it made to be out of the elements. Even though there was no natural heating source, already the icy sting on her cheeks began to relax.

It wasn't a large cavern inside, not like the one she had seen under Mt. Harafast. But it was dry, and it looked like the tunnels continued on for a little while, though the ceiling became more and more narrow as it went deeper.

Skellig merely surveyed the area quickly before giving a brief nod and retreating outside. Vander followed not far behind. Jak stayed a while longer, not eager to return to the cold so quickly.

"Not a bad place," said Seph putting one arm around her as they enjoyed being out of the weather. "If only it could be bigger."

"If there's one cave, there are probably more," Jak replied. "The scouts will find them."

"I hope so," replied Seph. "The Sky Fae still haven't reported anything."

Jak nodded. It was too early for Bretton and his scouts to be back yet, but they hadn't heard anything from any of the previous scouts either. The Sky Fae were particularly good at covering a lot of distance, but they had reported nothing so far. Hopefully that meant their altitude simply made it harder to spot things like a cave, rather than the idea that this cave was all there was.

The wagons with the Water Fae came in first, with Shadow and Bright Elves pushing them along towards the back of the caves. Jak

thought she caught sight of Amelia, her friend from the college of Skyeclass, in one of them. Jak winced. It couldn't be enjoyable for the Water Fae to be confined like they were. They needed to find a more permanent solution soon.

Others followed. Next came Girwurt and Noralim leading most of the gnomes and dwarves inside. A few Sky Fae fluttered through as well.

"That's a lot of Fae," said Sefh, observing everyone who entered.

It was true. Most of those entering the cave were Fae. What about all the humans? Jak frowned and retreated back through the cave entrance and along the cleft. What she saw was not what she wanted to see.

Skellig and Vander were once again staring each other down. Others, mostly Fae, had gathered around and were watching them argue.

"We can't give preference to any one side," said Skellig.

"You want us to be practical?" retorted Vander. "Well the gnomes, dwarves, and Sky Fae all take up less space. There aren't many of us that are large, apart from the trolls and they seem to be unphased by the cold."

"So we'll make sure those particular Fae are divided up equally among all the groups. But no one gets to stay inside for longer than a day. That's an order."

"And just who says you get to speak for all of us?" said Vander, his tone going dark.

Suddenly the tension between them grew cold. Jak could feel it. It was time for her to step in. "Vander, please listen to her. I asked her to lead."

Vander only glanced in her direction before returning his attention to Skellig. "Apologies, Jak. I respect everything you've done, and you will always have an honorary place among my people. But you've done what you can and now it's someone else's turn to lead."

"Yes, and that person is Skellig," Jak emphasized. She was okay if Vander no longer considered her a leader, but they had to make sure they were all following one person, and Skellig was the best leader Jak knew. "She'll make sure we get fair treatment."

"Circumstances are different where Fae are involved," said Vander.

"This is Illadar," said Sefh, speaking up for the first time. "A land of peaceful cohabitation. We can't allow such differences between our races to divide us or we'll be no better off than we were back on Earth."

That seemed to reach Vander, but not in a good way. He turned to Sefh and raised his arms wide. "Does this look like we're better off to you? Look, let me put it another way. The Fae stay. We are happy to

fill the remaining space with as many humans as will fit, and rotate them through accordingly. Hopefully our scouts will find more lodging soon. But we will stay, whether you like it or not.”

Skellig opened her mouth to protest but Vander interrupted her.

“And we will defend it if need be.”

Suddenly, everything went quiet. Everyone who listened was frozen as they watched Skellig and Vander face each other down. Jak felt a lump grow in her throat. This could not be happening. They had to find a way to make it all work out, so that everyone could have a chance at living under shelter.

“Is that a threat,” said Skellig, her voice as cold as the air around them.

“Only if you continue to enforce your foolish ideals that will get us all killed.”

Jak stepped in. “Vander, more people have a chance of dying if you fill the caves with Fae.”

“Humans will die,” he retorted. “Last I checked there were plenty of humans here, not to mention everyone back on Earth. We Fae number only in the hundreds. This is all we are. I will not put another one at risk of death. And I will not allow any misguided leadership—” he shot a venomous look at Skellig, “—to put us in that situation.”

Jak’s mouth was left hanging, but Skellig’s lips pressed together in a thin line. Then she turned and marched away, pushing aside some of the onlookers as she retreated back into the main camp.

Sparing a glance at Vander, who held the hint of a triumphant smile on his face, Jak hurried to catch up with Skellig.

“You can’t attack him,” she said as she fell into step beside the former Watcher major. “The Fae would kill too many people before you defeat them.”

“Hopefully it will not come to that,” said Skellig, continuing her march with her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. “But many could die the longer we wait out here. With the Fae taking priority in the caves, at most we will fit another six hundred humans inside. That leaves everyone else out in the cold for far too many days. It was too many as it was.”

“We survived well enough last night,” Jak offered.

“Yes, but what happens when food becomes scarce, or if the cold only worsens. What happens if Vander decides not to let us in at all? We can’t survive out here indefinitely. We need shelter.”

“Just hold out for a few days,” said Jak. “I’m sure the scouts will be back soon. They’re bound to find something, even if it’s just a sheltered cliff.”

“They had better,” replied Skellig, her face hardening. “Or we’ll be faced with some very difficult decisions.”

**B**ut the scouts did not return. One day passed, then two, and

soon a week had gone by and there was no word from anyone. Most of the Sky Fae returned on the first day, but with no success in finding additional shelter, and they had nothing to report about Bretton and his group either. The Sky Fae continued to come and go, but many chose to simply stay in the caves with the rest of the Fae. While they were used to cold weather, even they had lived in domed, stone houses.

And that was fast becoming a problem for everyone but the Fae themselves. Most among the humans were not used to this kind of extreme temperatures, other than those of Bretton's group. But even they had summers where they came from, and Jak had no idea if this winter would ever end.

Plus there was the problem of food. Thanks to those of the Triad's groups, they had a good amount of storage. But the sheep were already beginning to die from exposure, since humans and Fae took priority when it came to shelter and therefore sheep were not allowed in the caves. As soon as the sheep were all gone, they would have to resort to eating primarily from the grain and seed stores, which wouldn't last long.

There was one beacon of hope, however. The gnomes and dwarves had managed to grow mushrooms inside the mountain from spores they had brought. They were quickly turning what land they could into a small mushroom farm. But this meant less room for sleeping.

And therein lay their second greatest problem. Vander was not letting up on his proposed rotation. Most of the Fae remained in the caves, leaving room for only 200 humans or so at a time, and they had seven thousand.

For some Fae, it made sense that most of them would stay, such as the Water Fae who wouldn't last long in exposed conditions, or some of the gnomes to help keep the caves warm. But the Shadow Fae had no extra reason to be there, and neither did the dwarves or Sky Fae.

Only the Bright Fae and trolls appeared sympathetic to the

humans, and agreed to be part of the rotations. Well, the trolls didn't really seem to care one way or another. It was hard to tell what they were thinking. They mostly followed their leader, who did what Jak told him to do. She was the only one he would confide in. Even Skellig couldn't get him to do anything unless Jak relayed the command.

So the trolls mostly sat at the edges of the camp, acting as sentinels of sorts, watching for the return of Bretton's scouts, or the advent of any unforeseen dangers. Jak wasn't even sure if they ate. Maybe they received all the sustenance they needed from the planet itself.

Skellig kept everyone busy with a variety of exercises, such as training with former members of the Watchers, creating warmer clothing using wool from newly slaughtered sheep, or forming more permanent shelters with rock from the mountains. It gave people something to do, to get their blood flowing and their mind off their unsustainable predicament.

Seph also did what he could, preaching his sermons on the nature of the Guiding Hand, Illadar, and their fate on this land. It did just enough to give people hope, to keep them from abandoning any plans for survival.

She now spent most of her time talking with Seph. Vander gave her leave to come and go in the cavern, based on his respect for her mother, but she didn't like spending too much time there. Not when others could benefit from the space she would take up.

But with mounting pressures from lack of food, Vander's stubbornness, frequent snow falls, and the missing scouts, a messenger finally came to Jak with word that Skellig wanted to see her in her tent. They hadn't spoken much since arriving at the caves. Skellig had simply been too busy coordinating their survival, and Jak had done nothing but go along with the plan.

"Jak, thank you for coming." Skellig said as Jak entered through the main flap of the command tent. It wasn't exactly a private tent anymore. Large tents like this one were few and far between, and now contained as many humans as they could fit into the space. Most looked up as Jak approached, but looked back down again as they realized who it was. The adoration that used to glaze their eyes when they looked at her was long gone now.

"What do you need, Skellig?" she asked, not meaning to sound so curt though it might have come out that way.

Skellig sighed and leaned forward on her stool so she was resting her arms on her knees. The woman looked exhausted. Not for the first time, Jak felt a stab of regret as she realized what she, in creating Illadar and failing to stop Marek, had done to Skellig and everyone else.

"I need you to lead a search party for Bretton and his group. The

Sky Fae haven't found him, and I need to make sure they didn't fall into any danger that we don't know about."

Jak frowned. "What makes you think I can do it? I'm all but helpless in a survival situation."

"As far as your brands go, yes, but you have ingenuity that many lack. You certainly weren't helpless before you received all your brands. And to be honest, I simply don't have someone else I trust to lead a search like this."

"But Gabriel, Li, or Mosaial," Jak protested.

Skellig shook her head. She glanced at the others inhabiting her tent, many of which were watching them with casual interest. She waved Jak closer and spoke in a whisper. "Gabriel is not feeling well, and the others might be able to help but I don't know them as well as I know you, Jak. Besides, on the off chance that Bretton and his people are still alive, they might have ulterior motives which have prevented them from returning. I can't take the chance that Li and Mosaial would ally with him against us."

Jak knit her brow together. "You don't really think that's what happened, do you?"

Skellig paused but in the end shook her head. "It's far more likely that they are dead, and covered in snow, which is why the Sky Fae would be unable to spot them from above."

Jak swallowed. It was the honest truth, she agreed. That was most likely what happened to Bretton. What would she do if she discovered she had saved Bretton from the harsh, winter elements in the past, only for him to die here?

"I'll go if you want me to, Skellig," said Jak with a shrug. "But I can't guarantee that it will do any good."

"At the very least it will help assure the others that we're being proactive," Skellig said. "Thank you for being willing, Jak. I'll make sure to send a Flamedancer with you, and a gnome if one is willing." She sighed again and bent even further so that her elbows were resting on her knees and her hands ran through her short, blonde hair. "But I can't guarantee that. Vander is becoming increasingly defensive when I ask any of the Fae for help. He pretty much speaks for all the Fae now. Yewin is the only Fae member of our original council who still talks to me."

Jak pressed her lips together. She stepped closer and put a hand on the major's shoulder. This had to be hard on the woman. And Jak, admittedly, had done very little for the good of the group as a whole. Perhaps it was time to change that.

"We'll find those men and women, Skellig," she said, with a renewed strength entering her tone. "Just tell me who to bring, and we'll see it done."



Skellig looked up at Jak. "I appreciate that," she said before standing. "It's getting late, so let me negotiate with Vander to see if a gnome can go with you, and you can go in the morning."

Jak gave a faint nod, and returned to her area of the camp, where Seph waited for her.



THE NEXT MORNING, she set out with five others. Two were Sightseers, who she would count on to spot the scouts from a distance. The third was a Flamedancer to help keep them warm at night. The fourth was none other than Yewin, who had volunteered after Vander refused to let a gnome go with Jak. Yewin's abilities as a Bright Elf weren't the kind that would keep them warm at night, but he could provide some much needed visibility in dimly-lit conditions. And perhaps his innate attraction to truth would somehow lead them in the right direction.

But to Jak's surprise, Viona, one of the scouts for the Shadow Elves, volunteered as well. Jak was pleased that the woman wanted to accompany her, knowing that not all of the Shadow Elves were as reclusive as Vander. Skellig appeared skeptical of the elf, but allowed Viona to accompany Jak anyway.

Skellig gave them each a week's rations of food, telling them to return by that time if they hadn't found the others. "If you do not return," she said. "We will have to assume that you met the same fate as the others. And I can't risk sending out another search party like this."

Jak understood and wouldn't blame Skellig for not coming after them if something happened. This was going to be dangerous, especially if Bretton had vanished for a reason other than dying of cold. Though she secretly hoped there was another explanation. Dying of cold seemed far too...pointless.

They started in the direction Bretton had gone: east, or at least what they assumed was east on this planet, since the sun rose on that side. They followed the mountains which lay on their right or south side, searching as they went for any signs of more caverns, in addition to their search for Bretton's crew.

They continued that way for more than a day, stopping at night to huddle together on a dry patch created by the Flamedancer. Yet this did little to make sleeping easier, and Jak grew more and more exhausted as time went on. If only she had her Sleeplessness brand again, she wouldn't need sleep. In fact, with all the other brands at her disposal, she wouldn't have needed anyone. She could have gone in

search for the missing scouts herself.

But that was no longer an option. It would never be an option again if she couldn't find a way to remove the effects of the Void brand, and that wasn't looking very likely.

Perhaps she should have asked Seph to come along. He was the only thing that kept her from falling into despair for what she had lost, the only one to fill that void inside of her. Out here, she was left with nothing but her thoughts for most of the journey.

Viona remained silent for almost the entire trip, but Yewin managed to make mild conversation with her. Even that began to peter off once they had been traveling for over a day. Talking took too much effort. And it was hard to carry a conversation when you kept checking every nearby lump under the snow to make sure it wasn't a body. It was a sobering experience.



"YEWIN," she said after several hours of trudging through the snow. "Can you try and link with me?"

Yewin glanced at her sidelong. "We don't have a troll here to provide the energy that requires."

Jak sighed. "I know, you don't have to hold it for long. But perhaps we could get a glimpse at where Bretton is, and if that works, maybe we could do the same for finding shelter."

"I suppose I could give it a try," he drew nearer and Jak raised a hand signalling to the rest of their group to stop. Viona eyed them, watching carefully.

"Mostly, I just want to see if it still works," Jak continued. "With the Void brand and all."

"I see," Yewin rubbed his hands together slowly. "Well, we'll see what happens." He placed a hand on Jak's shoulder, an action he commonly used before starting up the link.

But Jak didn't feel anything, and she slowly closed her eyes as she witnessed Yewin squint in concentration.

"I'm sorry, Jak," he said after a minute. "It appears your Void brand also prevents linking."

Jak said nothing in return, but simply started moving forward again. The rest of the company followed once they realized she wasn't about to stop.

Of course nothing had happened. Jak had known it wouldn't, deep down. That was probably why she hadn't tried it before. But the failure to link was yet another thorn in her side, a reminder that she was, for all intents and purposes, useless to the company.

And so she did nothing but kept walking.

On their second day, the sun came out, bathing everything for miles in a bright light that radiated off of the snow and all but blinded them. Well, blinded her at least. The Sightseers seemed to be doing just fine. They could deal with extreme brightness at least to some extent.

"I think I see something," said one of the Sightseers, suddenly. She was squinting, which for a Sightseer meant whatever she was looking at was extremely far away or difficult to see.

"What is it?" Jak said, jumping on the news. "Is it them?"

"I don't know," said the Sightseer. "There are some shapes up ahead that don't match the typical snow-covered rocks. Whatever it is, it's covered in snow."

Jak felt her spirits sink. So it wasn't the scouts then. Or if it was, they weren't alive. Still it was more than they'd seen so far.

"Take us there."

The woman led Jak and the others ahead. Soon the other Sightseer noticed it as well, but they both said nothing as they drew closer and got a better look. That didn't bode well.

"I can see it too, now," said Yewin as they neared. Jak followed his gaze and realized that she could also make out several objects of some kind that stuck out of the snow, right next to a huge boulder that must have fallen away from the mountain.

The Sightseer was right, it didn't look like rock. But it didn't quite look like a human either. If they had died from the cold, they would have fallen or collapsed to the ground and died there. These forms ahead of them looked more like standing statues.

They were statues. They had to be. As Jak and the others approached, they remained in place, unmoving but clearly humanoid in shape, though it was hard to tell by the way the snow draped over them. But they couldn't really be statues, there was no intelligent life on the planet besides themselves. Jak knew that more than anyone, having recently created the place.

A chill moved through Jak's body as they drew nearer. She could see clothing on the statues where snow had fallen away. It matched those of Bretton's group. Oh no, oh please no.

She brushed the snow off the head of the nearest figure, fearing what she would see. A pair of bright blue eyes stared sightlessly back at her, and she took a step back.

"No," she said aloud.

The eyes belonged to Bretton himself, frozen in place, his entire body caked in a layer of ice.

Jak sank to her knees. She had hoped...but she had been foolish. They had all known that Bretton's team was already dead. This just

confirmed it. She had saved Bretton in the past only to send him out to die among similar conditions. The urge to scream in frustration and sorrow came to her in a sudden rush. She didn't hold back. The pained yell escaped her throat in a harsh rasp, and tears poured down her cheeks and dropped onto the snow, only to freeze in place.

"I'm sorry, Jak," said Viona in a hushed tone when her cry had died down.

"How did this happen?" Jak found herself saying.

"I don't know," Yewin moved in closer for inspection. "Whatever froze them to death must have done so rapidly. Perhaps an isolated, and highly unusual storm that missed us near the caves."

Jak had been speaking more rhetorically, but Yewin was right to consider how the others had frozen so rapidly. Almost all of them were still standing. How was that even possible?

She rose to her feet and faced Yewin. "So you're saying that whatever caused this could also happen at our camp? That would kill everyone outside."

Yewin gave a slow, uncomfortable nod. "Yes, indeed it would." He glanced at Viona, who didn't meet his eyes. Jak knew what was making them all uncomfortable. Yewin knew as well as anyone that the Fae were disproportionately protected inside the cave.

"Then we have to get back to the others as fast as we can," said Jak. "We have to warn them. Perhaps we can convince Vander to let everyone in if there ever is a natural phenomenon like this. If we stand shoulder to shoulder we could probably fit everyone at once, at least for the duration of a storm."

Viona nodded but didn't look convinced, and neither did Yewin. Jak wasn't sure if it was the idea of convincing Vander of anything, or of fitting all seven thousand people in a cave large enough for only one thousand. They could try to build more shelters, but could they do it in time? But Jak supposed it didn't matter. It was all a long shot, but if Yewin was correct, and what happened to these scouts happened back at their camp, then they were in some serious danger. It would have to be enough to convince Vander to take action.

Jak spared another look for Bretton. There was definitely something eerie about the way in which he seemed frozen in time. It reminded her of when she'd used the Pillar of Eternity to suspend time around her. His body appeared frozen in mid-step, one arm reaching forward and one behind like he had been in the middle of walking when he had frozen. There wasn't even a look of pain on his face, no hint as to what may have happened to them. What kind of storm were they dealing with if it had the power to do this? Or was there some other power at work? Perhaps she had been wrong to think this planet was lifeless.

She turned next to the Flamedancer. "Can you thaw them out?"

The man hesitated, "I can, but it wouldn't do much good. We don't have the resources to carry them all back, and the ground is too hard to bury them."

He was right, and Jak knew it. But she hated having to leave the scouts like this. She would just have to come back later when they were better prepared to deal with the dead. But that time was not now.

"Okay," she said finally. "Then we should head back. If we hurry we can get there by tomorrow evening."

The others did not argue, and they followed Jak as she led the way back to their camp. Since they weren't scanning for caves or searching for survivors this time, they made much better progress retracing their steps.

They heard the people of their camp before they saw it. A great many were shouting. Jak paused to try and listen but couldn't make out anything specific. Something was wrong.

Jak was tired, hungry, sleepy, and her legs felt like jelly, but she forgot all of that and ran. Had something happened while she was gone? Had they been attacked by some unknown assailant, or worse, had hostilities broken out between their main body and those inside the caves? Vander would not react well if provoked, and the mere thought of him going toe to toe with Skellig caused Jak's pace to

increase.

No one was fighting when Jak finally came into view of the camp. But they were crowding around the mountain, as if eager to get closer. Something was happening at the entrance. Whatever it was caused the commotion around it.

Jak reached the edge and pushed her way past the thick crowd. Some realized who she was and gave way, but in the end she had to push and shove, with many apologies to those she caused to stumble, to make her way to the front.

“Skellig!” she cried as she finally caught sight of what was happening. Skellig stood at the head of their group with flames in both hands, as she faced down a snarling Vander. The Shadow Elf wasn’t moving though he was clearly trying, and Jak immediately knew why. Two Telekinetics stood on either side of Skellig, their brand hands glowing as they held Vander and a handful of other elves in place.

“Jak!” it was Vander who spoke first. “We’re being attacked.” His fellow Shadow Elves, and even a few Fae from other races, including the gnomes and Sky Fae, glared daggers at Skellig.

Skellig did not take her eyes off the Shadow Elf. “We’re merely restraining him. He would have attacked us otherwise.”

“What is going on?” Jak finally managed to say.

“These pigs want to keep our rations for themselves,” snarled Vander.

“You’re lowering their rations?” Jak stared at Skellig, demanding an answer.

Skellig spared a glance at Jak. “We only wish to ensure that all of our assets are enjoyed equally. If the Fae won’t agree to an equal rotation, we can’t agree to an equal distribution of resources.”

“So you started fighting?” she said, then understanding dawned and she looked at Skellig under a new light. “You were planning this.”

Skellig’s face went taught. It was enough of a confirmation.

Jak’s face drained. “You didn’t send me away because you thought I was a good leader. You sent me away because you didn’t want me around when you tried something like this.”

“Treachery,” said Vander. Jak shot him a harsh look. The last thing she wanted was for him to twist her words to his own purposes.

Skellig did not answer her question, but instead asked, “I assume you didn’t find any more caves on your expedition.”

“No, we didn’t find any caves. But...” she trailed off. She was about to mention the dead scouts, but that wouldn’t be the best thing to reveal right now. Skellig and Vander were at each other’s throats, and one or the other of them were sure to use the news as fuel for their argument. And right now she didn’t want either of them to have

that chance.

"But what?" Skellig narrowed her eyes, immediately taking note of Jak's hesitation.

"Nothing," said Jak. "The point is, we didn't find anything. But that just means we should work together to keep looking. We found these caves without too much trouble. We can find more. Or even make more."

But neither Vander nor Skellig were listening. The latter still had her eyes narrowed at Jak. "What's going on, Jak? You're back far earlier than I expected. Why would you return so soon? If you didn't find new accommodations then that must mean you found the scouts. And judging by the fact that they did not return with you..."

Jak let out a breath. Leave it to Skellig to figure it out so perfectly. She was their tactical leader for a reason.

Jak looked from her to Vander to the other Fae that gathered on Vander's side. "I can tell you. But will you promise not to attack each other and agree to work out a peaceful solution to all this? We can't afford to fight each other."

Vander and Skellig met each other's eyes, as if asking the same question. Then finally Skellig extinguished the flames in her palms. "I suppose we can try it your way, Jak."

Vander glanced at Jak. "I will respect your wishes for your mother's sake, but only for today. If we cannot come to an agreement, I must take the major's actions as a hostile attempt."

"More hostile than you barring access to the caves?" Skellig shot back, but Jak held out a hand that made them both go silent.

"Please," Jak said. "We have to work together. We have such potential, and I know it looks bad at the moment, but we've come too far to fail now." The words were hers, though to her ears, they sounded like they were meant for herself as much as they were meant for Skellig and Vander. Where had those words come from? Moments ago, upon seeing the frozen corpses of her friends, she had felt quite the opposite of hope. What had changed?

Skellig gave an order and the Telekinetics let Vander go. He straightened and everyone, including Jak, tensed. Shadow Elves were dangerous after all. If he turned invisible...

But Vander remained composed, and he looked to Jak expectantly, though his posture suggested he wasn't happy with the situation. Yet for now he deferred to Jak. The other Fae also relaxed, following the example of their leader.

"Okay," Jak began slowly. "We did find the scouts. They were frozen to death."

Skellig closed her eyes as Jak confirmed the worst. Mutters ran through the crowd, but Vander remained unchanged in his expression.

Did he not care?

Jak continued. "We don't think they died under normal circumstances. They were still standing when they were frozen, as if they were in the process of traveling when it happened. We think something, like a freak storm or other threat caused them to die in extremely fast and harsh conditions, otherwise they would have fallen before they died."

Viona spoke up from behind Jak. "I can confirm that they do not appear to have died from the cold alone. We should guard against the same thing happening here."

Vander looked at Yewin and nodded slightly to himself. Well at least he took the advice of a Fae more seriously.

"Yet you don't know what it was?" Skellig asked.

Jak shook her head. "No. Our best guess is some kind of storm that we've never encountered before, one that is small enough but deadly enough to cause what happened."

Skellig's face grew as cold and hard as the dead scouts. "This is merely more evidence that we must continue to fit as many as we can within the caverns."

"We are already fitting as many as possible," said Vander. "More in fact. The Sky Fae, gnomes, and dwarves are small. We fit more bodies with them inside."

Skellig sighed and put one hand to her temple. She had probably argued this point a million times by now, and Jak could see her frustration. Vander was right in a way. They managed to fit more bodies his way. But it also meant the Fae got priority, and the humans weren't allowed to rotate through as often. If a freak storm like the one that killed Bretton were to pass through, it would be mostly humans that suffered.

Jak swallowed, trying to rack her brain for solutions. "Right now, I think maybe we're spending too much effort trying to deal with the resources we have, and not enough time searching for more. Perhaps if we sent more scouts, we'd not only have more room in the caves for those who remain, but we'd have a greater chance at finding someplace else to dwell."

"We've already lost our scouts. We can't risk any more while we still don't understand what killed them." said Skellig.

"Well, we're all going to die if we stay here." Jak said. It was a harsh truth, but truth nonetheless. They didn't have supplies, and though the cave mushrooms were promising, they'd have to fill the entire cave with them to have even the smallest chance of making enough for all. And then there'd be no shelter and they wouldn't survive long without that.

Skellig sighed once again. "You're right, Jak. I suppose we can



spare a few. We would cover much more ground, however, if the Fae agreed to help.” She shot a glance at Vander, whose jaw tightened.

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to send a few more scouts,” he said, slowly. “Though they will need full rations and a place in the caves when they return. If they’re going to be doing the majority of the work they need a place to recover.”

“Fine,” said Skellig. Jak stared at the major in surprise that she had agreed so readily. “As long as we can continue to fill the caves with as many humans as will fit.”

Vander gave a begrudging nod, and stalked back into the caves. Jak narrowed her eyes at the Shadow Elf. They had made progress today, but she still didn’t like much of what she saw in Vander. For one, he hadn’t left the caves since they arrived. He wasn’t small like the gnomes or Sky Fae. He was human sized and therefore should have rotated out to make way for others to have a night in the caves. Did he really care about ensuring the Fae were well taken care of, or was he more concerned with his own comfort?

Skellig likewise returned to the main camp, barking orders for all the onlookers to disperse and return to their duties. And like Vander, she did not look happy. But at least Jak had managed to talk them out of fighting. That was something. But what would happen when they inevitably stopped listening to her. Without her brands she was just one among many. Another face in the crowd. And Skellig had just sent her away so she wouldn’t be there when she tried to undermine Vander. Could she even trust Skellig now?

And speaking of faces in the crowd, she scanned to try and find Seph. There was nothing she needed more right in that moment than to huddle up on his chest and feel his arms wrap around her.

Blessedly, as the crowd began to disperse, Jak quickly found Seph who had stayed behind. She almost ran into him, flinging her arms around his waist and clutching at his torso.

Seph chuckled at her eagerness, but held her tenderly for a moment before speaking. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Did you hear what happened?” she asked.

“Yes, I heard. And I’m sorry. I know you were friends with Bretton.”

Well, not exactly friends. But they had shared a connection, since it was Jak who saved Bretton as a child, through the use of the Pillars of Eternity sending her back in time. Jak nodded. “I wish I knew what was going to happen to us.”

“Things don’t look very good, do they?” Seph confirmed, though he didn’t sound worried. How did he do that? Even now, with tempers escalating, and people dying, he still managed to maintain his faith.

“I just wish I didn’t have to get pulled into every conflict,” Jak

said. "If only they could work it out for themselves and I could just rest for a while."

"Are they pulling you in?" he asked, his hand running passively through her hair. "Would your life be restful if you stood by and let them fight?"

Well that was one way to think about it. She supposed she didn't *have* to become a part of anything now that she didn't have her powers. In a way, with the loss of her brands also went a measure of responsibility. Or at least that's what she had thought. Maybe she wasn't cut out for the peaceful life because she wouldn't find peace in the midst of conflict. The only way to have peace was to create it, and foster the same in others.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. "I guess it would have been harder on me not to step in."

"So what are some more ways for you to 'step in'?" he asked next.

She broke their embrace just enough to look up into his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I know you, and I know that you will be happiest when you're doing something. Preferably something to help," he winked at her.

Jak smiled. "You have me all figured out, don't you?"

His smile widened. Relics, but he was cute. "Only now that we're on the same level. Before we came here, I couldn't have begun to understand the enormity of your vastness and..." he cut off as Jak punched him in the shoulder. Now he was teasing her. Great. That was something Naem might have said, and she admitted she kind of liked it. Teasing had been one of Naem's more redeemable qualities. Most of the time.

The thought of Naem brought her emotions back down. Where was he now? Did he have any idea what was happening?

"So let's hear it," Seph continued. "How else can you help people?"

She rested her head back on his chest to think, trying to push out her fears for Naem. "Well I suppose I could take some of the edge off of Skellig's work by leading the scouts. I don't think I would need my powers for that."

"Not a bad idea. And what else?"

"Are you getting at something?"

"No, just brainstorming."

Jak released her grip on him and took his hand in hers, beginning to walk back towards their camp. But on a sudden hunch, she changed direction to head back toward the caves.

"Thought of something?" asked Seph at her sudden shift.

"I want to see the caves again," she said. "It might help me think."

On her way to the caves, Jak frowned to see Shadow Elves

materialize in front of the entrance. They were guarding the way in. But upon seeing her they parted to let her and Seph in. Probably on Vander's orders. She was apparently the only human he held a soft spot for. And she would hope so. She had saved Vander's life after all. But what would have happened had she been anyone else?

A wave of warm bliss washed over them as they entered. Jak had forgotten just how wonderful it felt to not be cold all the time. No wonder Vander didn't want to leave.

The inside was filled with people, most of them Fae, but with a few humans near the front, packed next to each other like too many sheep in a small pen. The Fae had far more room than they should be taking. Jak wound her way through a small path that led through them. There were two large openings in the back, like two separate passageways, though they ended abruptly if one followed either one for very long.

Jak noticed Vander talking to several of the Sky Fae and fellow elves along one passageway, so she went the other way. Vander wasn't exactly in her good graces right now.

Seph followed her without speaking, their hands still connected with Jak leading the way. She scanned everyone who was on the ground. Maybe she needed a talk with Amelia. Those conversations always helped her see more clearly for some reason. The water-filled wagons were at the back, so she started in that direction first.

On the way, however, her eyes found Girwirt among a group of gnomes. The gnome's eyes landed on her at almost the same instant.

"Jak!" the gnome said excitedly as she approached, scrambling to his feet. Jak raised an eyebrow. The gnome almost never used her name. It was usually "hey you" or "giant".

"Hey Girwirt," she said. "How are the caves treating you?"

"Alright as things go," said Girwirt. "Good to be out of that wretchedness."

"You mean the cold?" asked Seph.

"No, the sun," replied Girwirt.

Jak hid a slight smile. "I'll admit it's much warmer in here though. You and the other gnomes are doing a great job of keeping the place heated."

"It ain't easy," said Girwirt, though he did look pleased with her praise. "It's much harder to heat up a rock just a little bit, than to melt it completely. Takes more control. A delicateness."

"I don't doubt it," said Jak. "Thank you for all your help."

Girwirt paused to grumble something that sounded like a 'you're welcome,' or at least as close to it as the gnome could get.

"Are the Water Fae in those wagons?" Jak asked, pointing towards the back.

"Yeah," said Girwirt. "We keep them back there because it's closer to where we keep the molten rock. Keeps their water warm."

Jak frowned at the gnome, "I thought you said you don't heat the rock that much."

"Outside that's true, but in here it's easier to just take what we can from the back, melt it, and let the heat travel through the cave. Keeps all the giants warm for longer and gives us a break."

A sudden idea surfaced in Jak's head. "And what do you do with the rock once you're done with it?" "We let it cool and heat it up again, obviously," said Girwirt. "What else?"

"And you get the stone from the cave wall?"

"And floor." Girwirt's eyes narrowed. "Why the stupid questions?"

But Jak was facing Seph, her eyes beginning to widen. Seph was understanding too, judging by the way an excited smile began to spread on his face. A silent communication passed between them.

"From the back of the caves?" he pointed.

She nodded, "And we could use the extra for bricks."

"What if the caves collapsed?"

"The dwarves could help with that. They can sense that sort of thing."

Girwirt stepped between them. "Will you two tell me what's going on? Are you both okay?"

"Girwirt. Has no one tried melting the stone at the back to create a bigger cave?"

"I..." Girwirt raised a finger and opened his mouth as if to give a sarcastic retort. But for once, Girwirt said nothing as realization dawned.



THEY STARTED GATHERING ALL the gnomes and dwarves in the area. Even Girwirt seemed somewhat excited at the prospect of simply

building a more complex cave system of their own. Now that she had thought about it, Jak was shocked that someone hadn't come up with the idea sooner. It was simple, really. All they had to do was melt the stone into a lava-like substance using the gnomes, and then carefully carry that stone to the front and use it to mold a larger entrance, one with a roof, or bricks for outer structures.

Though the gnomes had worked a lot in recent days, most of them seemed eager to try something new, something that could potentially change their situation for the better. And the dwarves were also eager to pitch in, mostly as guides on where to dig, letting the gnomes know what areas had less stress on the rock, so they could reasonably melt it without the cave ceiling coming down on them.

Unfortunately, there was one person who was unhappy with the new developments.

"What do you think you are doing?" said Vander, pushing his way through the excited onlookers as the gnomes took great handfuls of molten lava to mold into bricks and take away towards the front entrance.

"It's progress," said Jak, turning to face Vander. "Now if we don't find any more caves in the area, we have a backup plan."

"You're exploiting the gnomes for their abilities. You're enslaving them like they were enslaved before."

Jak scoffed. It wasn't the same at all. The gnomes were choosing to help. If they needed rest or didn't want to work, no one would force it on them. She was about to say as much when Girwirt spoke instead.

"Actually, it's not all that bad." He held a glowing orb of rock in both hands, his Fae magic keeping it from cooling. Jak could feel the heat of the small piece of molten rock washing over her. "For once, the girl giant had a good idea."

Jak smiled. Girwirt must be in a good mood if he was back to calling her a giant.

Vander scowled, but nodded. "I guess it would be good to have a bit more space in here." He didn't look like he was pleased, which Jak couldn't imagine why. It would take the gnomes a long time to make significant progress, but it was a win win for everyone. They got more space, and the gnomes were happy to do the work. Everyone was happy that at least *something* was happening.

"I'd like to speak to the Sky Fae as well," she said, her confidence increasing now that Vander had conceded to her ideas. "I'll be coordinating their scouting trips with the humans and anyone else who wants to join in."

Vander's eyes darkened. "Be careful, Jak. You may be Karlona's daughter, but you no longer bear the same authority you once held."

Jak met his eyes head on. She was not going to let Vander bully

her into backing down. Not when they had something good going for them for once. “So power is the only authority you recognize?”

Vander said nothing to that. He merely sneered and retreated back to his side of the cave. Jak fought down a small smile. She had won this round, but Vander was going to become a problem if he kept up this attitude. Especially since the other Shadow Elves seemed to agree with him. Or at least, they followed him as devoutly as they had followed Karlona. Except possibly Viona, who met Jak’s eyes briefly before turning to follow Vander.

She continued working with the gnomes and dwarves, coordinating where to enlarge the cavern, and where to place the stone they extracted. She couldn’t directly help of course, but she managed to gather several of their Flamedancers to help move the molten metal. That sped up the process considerably, though it was still slow work.

When they were finished for the day, they had carved out enough of the wall to fit at least fifty more people. And the caves were still structurally sound thanks to the guidance of the dwarves. Perhaps this was originally how the cavernous network of Mt. Harafast had first formed. Perhaps they could eventually house everyone, and have enough space left over to grow a large crop of mushrooms.

It didn’t solve all their problems. It would still take weeks before they were able to fit everyone, and by that time they would likely be out of food, even with all the stores they had brought with them.

But still, Jak slept very well that night, choosing to indulge herself by sleeping in the caves, with Seph nearby, among the many dwarves and gnomes who also slept well after a hard day’s work.



THE NEXT MORNING, Jak awoke to someone jostling her awake. It was Yewin, his face grave.

“Come Jak,” he said. “Gabriel has asked to see you.”

Her sleep fled from her eyes and she rose, glancing down at Seph who was still asleep. She would leave him be for now. It was still early. But Yewin’s face did not look like there was good news. Was Gabriel okay? Skellig had mentioned he wasn’t feeling well. But she hadn’t considered the possibility that it might get worse.

“Lead the way,” she said to Yewin. She followed the Bright Elf until they exited the caves and a wave of icy cold washed over Jak’s entire body, causing her flesh to tingle. She’d forgotten just how cold it was out here.

Yewin led her to a tent not far from the cave entrance. Gabriel

should be inside the caves. If he was sick then surely Vander would be okay with him sleeping there, at least until his sickness lost its edge.

But when Yewin entered the tent flap, with Jak following close behind, she realized it was more complicated than that. Many cots lay in rows inside the tent, full of people. All of them were coughing and bore pale faces. A few volunteers were going up and down the rows to feed hot pots of tea and soup to everyone on the ground. But the rations were still small, and the tea was thinned by adding extra snow to the boiling pots.

"I didn't know it was this bad," she muttered to Yewin as they passed a man with red sores on his arms, likely caused from frostbite. Why weren't these people inside the caves?

"It has worsened over the past few days," replied Yewin. "That is why Skellig was so adamant to get a proper rotation through the caves that she held back rations from the Fae."

Jak glanced at Yewin. "What do you think of that? You are a Fae after all."

Yewin paused, "I believe in equal opportunity."

That was all he said before they arrived beside one cot, where Li knelt next to Gabriel, washing his face. She caught sight of Jak and stood. "Thank you for coming. He's been asking for you."

She hadn't known Li was a healer. Or at least had some kind of training. But the woman wasn't exactly looking so well herself. Her skin was slightly green, and her posture sagged. Hopefully the job wasn't taking its toll on the woman. They didn't need the spread of disease on top of everything else.

"I'll talk to him," Jak said, kneeling to take Li's place beside Gabriel. "Why don't you sit down?"

Li nodded, and Jak turned her attention to her old mentor.

Gabriel lay with several blankets piled on. His face was pale, and his beard seemed touched with more gray than Jak remembered. He smiled upon seeing her.

"Hello Jak," he said. His voice was hoarse, as if he was trying to make his voice sound normal, but didn't have the strength for it. "I'm glad you could come."

Jak knelt next to him. "Gabriel, I'm sorry, I didn't know it was this bad."

"It's alright, Jak. I'm honestly surprised I lasted this..." he broke off as a fit of coughing racked his body, lasting for quite a while before he got it under control. Jak winced. The coughs came from deep in the lungs, wet and coarse. Gabriel was not well.

"Don't we have any Healers?" she asked. If only she still had her brands she could probably do something.

"We have a few," said Gabriel. "I branded some of them myself

from Li and Mosaial's company. But Healing takes time to learn and it's also incredibly draining. They can only do so much. People are becoming sick faster than they can heal."

"Is it something serious?" she asked.

Yewin answered, "Not that we can tell. A common flu most likely, but compounded with the cold it's spreading fast and not going away."

"We need to get you into the caves." Jak responded as Gabriel went into another fit of coughing.

"No good," said Gabriel. "Vander is relentless. He won't let us in because he thinks if he lets one of us in, then more will follow, till no one remains in the caves except those that are ill. And he fears the illness will only spread faster in a confined space."

"Then so be it," Jak retorted. "We can't let that stop us. I'll talk to him, don't worry."

"Jak," said Gabriel, taking her hand in his. She didn't like the way he addressed her. It was soft and...final.

"We can get you past this," she said. "Just wait and in a few years we'll be laughing about this day. I've found a way to expand the caves."

"I heard," said Gabriel, the ghost of a smile coming to his face. "I'm very proud of you. Jak, I need you to understand something."

Jak hesitated. Once again Gabriel was behaving like he wasn't going to last long. She couldn't deal with that line of thinking. Gabriel had been her mentor only for a year or so, but it felt like much longer. With her parents gone, Gabriel was the only parental figure she had left. But despite all that, she found herself saying, "What is it, Gabriel?"

"You are not done," he said in response. His voice was growing more hoarse with the effort of speaking. "You may think your efforts are no longer needed, now that you have created this planet and lost your branding power. But you are not done."

Jak's eyes began to sting. "There's not much I can do. Even what we're doing to increase the size of the caves, that was the gnomes, not me. I didn't do any of that."

"Your work with the gnomes is only the beginning. But you were not destined to do all that you did, only to falter here. I need you to believe in yourself."

"How, Gabriel? How am I supposed to continue when I can't even keep the air in here warm for you with Flamedancing, or fly with Telekinesis so I can search for more caves with Sightseeing. There is so much I can't do. I can't even give you a Healing brand to make all of this better."

Gabriel chuckled, "Jak." he said. His voice seemed stronger all of a



sudden. “You know better than to focus on what you can’t do. Focus on what you can. Look to Seph for an example. He has come to accept a life without brands, and it works well for him.”

Jak wanted to point out that Seph would still be more powerful with a brand, but she had a feeling that wasn’t what Gabriel wanted to hear. And she supposed there was some wisdom in what he was saying. After all, she had never felt better since arriving than when she worked with the gnomes to expand the caves. That had been focusing on what she could do, rather than what she couldn’t, just as Gabriel said.

Gabriel coughed again, and Jak thought she saw small specks of blood fly out of his mouth. But when the coughing subsided, he spoke once more. “Jak, I may not have much time left. Just know that I believe in you. Even now. And I don’t know if you’ll ever get your brands back. Perhaps there is no way. But if there is, I trust you to find it eventually.”

He began coughing again, and Jak rested one hand on his arm before standing. “We should let him rest,” said Li.

Jak gave Gabriel’s hand a final squeeze. “Thank you, Gabriel. I hope you are right.”

They exited the tent. A few of the sick reached their arms out to her, as if supposing she could help them. But she couldn’t, not like this. If she had her powers back, she could have given each of them a Healing brand and they would have all been fine.

But Gabriel was right, she couldn’t focus on that. Wishing she had the power to heal would not save anyone. She had to focus on what she could do.

“Vander,” she yelled the moment she was back inside the

caves. Yewin hadn’t followed her, choosing instead to remain with the sick. But that was fine. She didn’t need his support for this. “Vander!” she called again. “We need to talk.” Everyone inside the caves was looking at her. Good. This wasn’t something to be kept secret. They all needed to know what the Fae were doing by keeping everyone out.

In the confining caverns, it didn’t take her long to find the Shadow Elf. He was off down the right passage, along with the rest of his kind. He didn’t come to her, instead he leaned against the cavern wall with his arms folded.

“There are people dying out there,” she said as soon as she was close enough.

“We all knew people would die eventually,” Vander replied without a hint of remorse nor surprise in his voice. He had known about the sick people. “Your scouts were the first, these are only the latest to meet their end here.”

“Do you care nothing for these people who have supported you, whose brothers and sisters gave their lives to defend the Fae.”

“I honor them,” said Vander. His voice was still calm, unusually so. “But we have also given our lives to save them. At Foothold, at Skyecliff. No more. If this is to be our home, our planet, then it is all important that we survive.”

“This planet is not just for you,” Jak shot back. “It is a place for Fae and humans to live in harmony.”

“And if all the Fae perish from exposure outside, or illness inside, then what was the point of creating this planet in the first place?”

Jak glanced around to meet the eyes of those around her. The humans would understand, they would see that Vander clearly cared little for their wellbeing. But she saw no humans, none close enough to listen. The area was full of Fae. Gnomes, dwarves, Sky Fae, Shadow and Bright Elves. All of them surrounded Jak, the only human among them, apart from the scattered few closer to the entrance.

“Vander, please,” she said, her voice dropping to something barely

above a whisper. "Gabriel is dying. And he's not the only one. The gnomes can make the room. Within a few weeks we can make these caverns big enough for all of us. Until then, can't you make room for those who are ill."

Vander paused. Perhaps he would see reason. With the gnomes working on the walls, perhaps he could allow some compassion for those who needed it.

"They would likely spread their diseases to us," he said finally, and Jak's heart dropped. "Perhaps when the caverns are large enough I will consider it."

Anger flared in Jak, and her face grew hot. "Who are you to decide? Who gave you the right?"

"And who gave you the right?" Vander shot back. He was angry now too. "The only reason you were anything is because you were an anomaly, you had the ability to give multiple brands. But now you are nothing but a little girl entering the real world now, pouting because she can't have her way."

That dug deep, but Jak kept a straight face. *You are not done*, Gabriel had said. She had to believe in herself the way Gabriel did.

She took a deep breath. "Vander. I respect your wishes to protect yourself and the Fae. But what you are doing is only promoting more violence. If you continue, you will be attacked."

Vander's eyes turned cold, and a tension rose up among the Fae that hadn't been there before. "Is that a threat, Jak?"

"Not a threat, just the 'real world.'" Jak replied, throwing his words back at him. "Because you're right. I don't hold the power I once held. And I will not be able to stop seven thousand people from bearing down on you when you choose to make yourself their enemy."

Vander considered her, his face contorting with building rage. Yes, he knew she was right. Deep down he knew that he was the problem here. But his pride was too much to admit that fact. She could only hope that the others saw it.

Finally, Vander spoke in a low tone. "I want you out of here. You are no longer welcome among our people."

Jak nodded. She had been expecting this. Yet she noted with some satisfaction that some of the Fae, particularly the Bright Elves were looking at Vander as if to make sure they had heard them right. After all, no one had given more than Jak for their cause. And they all knew it.

"I'm sorry, Vander," she said as she began to turn away. "I wish we could remain friends, I truly do. But I have long promised myself, on the bones of my parents, that I would help those in need, those who were oppressed. That once included you, before today. Now you are the oppressor."

“You got us into this mess,” he spat back at her, but she put one foot in front of the other, away from Vander. Away from the toxin that was infecting these people. His voice carried behind her. “If you hadn’t brought us here, none of this would have happened. We could have stayed in the valley. We could have had room to grow, plenty of food and water, and time to rest. But thanks to you, we have none of that.”

Her anger burned away the effect of his insults. The elf was resorting to personal attacks now. She had gotten to him. That was a victory if not one that would lead to peace. She could only hope that the others saw what she saw.

She exited the caves, pausing to look at the Shadow Elves that guarded the entrance. “You won’t be allowed to let me in after today,” she informed them. “But whatever happens, please know that I will go to my grave doing everything I can to bring stability between our peoples.”

The elves cocked their heads at her with curious expressions. They hadn’t overheard her conversation with Vander after all. But she didn’t give them time to ask questions. Instead she continued walking back to the outside camp.

That was when a chorus of screams reached her ears. They were coming from directly ahead.

Jak broke into a run. What had just happened? She couldn't see

anything that would have caused the screams. No one was attacking, and the weather was relatively normal. But then something flashed in front of her, a purple-like burst of energy, in a circular pattern. It expanded in a split second, cutting through the fabric of a nearby tent, before collapsing in on itself as quickly as it had appeared.

Jak blinked. This was something new. With Vander causing his trouble, and the problems with the cold, it took awhile for her brain to process a new threat. But as the strange circular light vanished, it left a tear in the tent where it had been moments before. Just then, another purple disk appeared ahead of her, cutting right into the arm of a woman who had just stood up to see what was going on.

The woman screamed as the disk sliced off her arm cleanly at the elbow. She jumped out of the way just in time to avoid having the disk continue on into her chest. But she fell to the ground, and blood was already flowing out of the woman's arm, staining the snow red. She needed help straight away.

Instinctively, Jak reached for those wells of power within her, but came up with nothing. Of course, there was nothing she could do. At least not with her brands.

She grabbed hold of the tent fabric that the mysterious energy disk had sliced moments before, and tore a large piece away. Then she ran to the injured woman and knelt next to her. She folded the fabric as best she could and pressed it against the woman's stump of an arm, hard.

The woman screamed again, and her eyes rolled back in her head. Her body went limp as she passed out from the pain and loss of blood. Jak continued pressing the fabric against the bleeding arm. She had to staunch the bleeding or this woman would die within seconds.

Then someone knelt beside her, and a pair of strong hands took hold of the makeshift tourniquet to hold it in place. It was Seph.

"I've got this," he said. "Find Skellig. Figure out what's going on."

Jak hesitated. Everything was happening so fast. What was this

strange phenomenon?

“Go!” Seph shouted, and the urgency in his voice prompted her to action.

She got to her feet and ran. She started towards Skellig’s command tent, but chaos surrounded her. Packed as tightly as they were, everyone had seen what happened to the woman, and there had to be others who were injured, judging by the screams she had heard earlier. They ran in all directions, and Jak had to push through to make any forward progress.

“Skellig!” she yelled as she caught sight of the woman’s short hair above the crowd. The major turned and caught sight of Jak. Then she rushed forward to meet her.

“Jak, what’s going on?”

“I was going to ask you the same question,” said Jak. “You have no idea how this started.”

They both jumped to the side as one of the shimmering disks opened up next to them, just a little too close for comfort.

“Could this be Vander’s doing?” Skellig asked, her expression resolute. Jak stared around them, trying to get a clear view of one of the flashing disks. “No, I don’t think so,” she said. “It doesn’t seem like a magic that they would have. I left the caves just before it started so it could be happening there too.”

“We’d better check on that just the same. If the people in the caves were safe, we might need to entertain the possibility that this was a hostile act on their part.”

Another disk flashed just above them, causing them both to jump, though they could never have avoided it in time had it appeared too close. It formed and dissipated with surprising speed. But something about it seemed familiar to Jak. Something about the way it looked when it was fully formed, before it collapsed in on itself. Or maybe it was the sizzling sound it made when it appeared.

“Vander kicked me out of the caves,” she said. “You’ll have to go yourself to talk to him. Or ask Yewin.”

“The latter would be preferable I think,” Skellig said, still tense. “He’s the only one still friendly with us.”

“There are others inside,” Jak corrected. “They just don’t know what to do, I think.”

“We’d better hope so. Or our being here could turn ugly. Especially after all this...” she trailed off.

Jak noticed it too in the same moment. The disks had stopped forming, at least temporarily. There was still shouting and chaos among the people, but as hard as Jak listened, she couldn’t make out the sizzling sound of the strange disks.

“Perhaps we’re in luck,” said Skellig. “Let’s assess the damage.”

Jak nodded, "I'll get right on it."

"Jak?" Skellig called to her. Jak half turned to face the major. "You've been through a lot lately. You don't have to involve yourself in this. Take a break and let us handle it."

Jak's lips formed into a line. "I appreciate the sentiment, Skellig. I know I can't do what I once could, but holding me back is literally the worst thing you could do to me. Especially now that Vander has banned me from the caves."

Skellig hesitated, then nodded. "Very well. I want you continuing to coordinate the scouting missions. We'll need that distraction after whatever this was," she waved a hand at the mayhem surrounding them. "Round up as many as you can, and enlist the help of as many Sky Fae as are willing."

Jak nodded. "I can do that."

They set to work. While Skellig inspected the damage left by the disks, it became Jak's job to pretend like nothing was wrong, recruiting others for scouting trips. That, however, proved impossible.

"You expect us to just get up and leave when the Fae are blatantly attacking us?" said one man. "We have to fight back or we won't last long!"

"It wasn't the Fae," responded Jak. This was unconfirmed, but she was sure that none of the Fae possessed any such powers. "It was something else. The Fae are actually working to expand the caves to fit more people. But we have to do our part and search for other options to work with in the meantime."

But her words were ultimately meaningless. "We won't last long anywhere if the Fae are turned against us," said one woman.

"We outnumber them now," said another. "If we don't take action that might not last, and they'll wipe us out for good."

"Please listen to me," said Jak. But the people weren't listening. Wherever she went, she heard similar reports. The people were afraid, and they needed something to blame. Or someone. Unfortunately, Jak had no explanation as to what the strange, destructive phenomenon had been. Though she could swear that something had been familiar about them. If only she could get a better look at one. From a safe distance of course.

But for now, they had bigger troubles. The people were gathering up against the entrance to the caves, shouting and waving their fists at the Shadow Elves that stood guard there. The elves were tense, and it didn't take long before more of them appeared, bearing their gleaming obsidian daggers in hand.

"Please, stop this!" Jak yelled as she tried to fight her way to the front, to get between the people and the Fae. "Fighting isn't going to solve anything."

Suddenly a jet of fire shot into the sky. It caught everyone by surprise, including Jak who followed the source of the fire to see Skellig emerging from the front of the crowd. She must have been fighting her way to the front just as Jak had.

"Enough!" she roared. "If anyone takes another step, I will have every Telekinetic under my command force you back. And if that doesn't work, I will stop you myself." She let a small burst of flame out of one palm for emphasis.

"You would take their side?" yelled a man Jak couldn't see. That prompted a chorus of shouts from those that were close enough to hear.

Once again Skellig raised a palm and shot her flames over the heads of the crowd. That seemed to have the intended effect, because most people quieted down.

"We will confer with the Fae to find an explanation. We will learn what caused this. Until that time, we will not take impulsive action. Not on my watch. And not if you want to live." She half turned to look at the Shadow Elves, who continued to wait with their obsidian blades at their sides. Their bodies taut. Jak spied Viona, but Vander was nowhere to be seen.

Jak breathed a sigh of relief as the majority of the crowd hesitated.

Skellig spoke once more. "Meanwhile, it's time for ration distribution. Return to your places and I'll make sure you get something. If you do not, then I will reserve what food we have for those who obey orders."

Jak frowned. That was a dangerous thing to say. What happened if the people suddenly realized that they could eventually overwhelm Skellig and her followers, taking the rations for themselves? Hopefully none of them were so far gone as to attack their own. Not yet.

Skellig's pronouncement seemed to have the desired effect, for now. The crowd dispersed and went back to their wagons and tents. But Jak remained behind, as did Seph and a handful of others.

Skellig was breathing hard. When it seemed that most of the danger had passed, she walked over to where Jak stood, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"You'd better hurry," she said. "If we don't find another place to live soon, I won't be able to stop them."

"I understand," said Jak. Skellig acknowledged her with a nod, and continued past Jak to join the main group.

"What is it she wants you to do?" said Seph, coming to rest next to Jak.

"I'm to coordinate the scouts," she replied. "And after today, I think we'd better hurry."

Seph nodded, "I suppose that even with what happened



to Bretton—”

“We have to push forward,” Jak said, finishing his sentence. “We’re all going to die here eventually if we don’t.” She took another deep breath. There was so much they had to worry about. Would they ever have a break?

“What can I do?” Seph asked, sensing her distress and holding out both arms for an embrace.

She responded by leaning into him, enjoying the faint warmth that they shared, and the feel of his breath washing over her as he held her close.

“I...I think you would do best by staying here and preaching to anyone who will listen. You give the people hope.”

He nodded, “I suppose by my ‘staying here’ you intend to go with the scouts.”

She hesitated. She didn’t want to leave him. And the scouts would do well enough without her. She was only one person after all.

But she also knew that she could never sit still if she stayed behind. She needed an outlet, and if that meant leaving with the scouts, even leaving Seph for a time, then she would have to do it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We’ll try to find something soon. Just keep people from murdering each other while we’re away.”

The corners of Seph’s lips twitched, as if he had been about to laugh. But they both knew that Jak was being totally serious.

“I will do my best,” he said. “Just be safe out there.”

Jak could do nothing more than nod.

Jak spent the rest of the day rounding up volunteers. While many

were disgruntled with the Fae, and still in a rage from the events of the day, many were also rearing to do something, even if that meant leaving the main camp and risking their lives.

Even some of the Fae seemed more willing to help out. Perhaps it was the threat of the people invading their caves, or maybe they wanted to find a place with more room. Though none of them said it outright, Jak suspected that many of them were opposed to Vander and the Shadow Elves, and were serving out of the kindness of their hearts.

Jak was just glad that they weren't all under Vander's sway. Several gnomes volunteered, though Jak asked many of them to remain behind to continue removing what they could from the back of the caves. But warmth was important, so she made sure to assign at least one to each group of scouts.

Sky Fae volunteered in great numbers, to Jak's delight. Perhaps they had realized that they were the most valuable of the Fae when it came to scouting. The Sky Fae didn't have much in the way of powers, but they were used to the cold, and were perfect for their current predicament.

Others of the Fae volunteered as well. Some dwarves, Bright Elves, and even one Shadow Elf: Viona. Jak cautioned her to remain behind, unfortunately, since she wasn't sure how Vander would take one of his own choosing the humans over him at this stage.

It wasn't long before Jak had twelve individual groups of twelve people, with at least one gnome and Sky Fae per group.

She included herself in one group, taking with her Perchel the Sky Fae, and Girwirt the gnome. They were both leaders of their respective races, and Jak wanted to make sure she had some time to talk to them. Besides, they would be needed for where they were going, because Jak had assigned her own scouting group to follow in the footsteps of Bretton and his companions. Perhaps while they were out, they would discover the nature of what froze them to death so

quickly.

They set out the next morning, after Skellig had approved Jak's request for a week's worth of rations for each group. The sky was clear but the air as cold as ever.

They spent most of the first and second day without much conversation, other than some talk of the sudden appearance of those magical disks, which Jak quickly interrupted to change the subject. It wouldn't do to speculate too much on that account. But it was now the second unexplained problem that they had encountered, after the mysterious storm or whatever had frozen Bretton and his group.

Perchel spent most of his time in the sky, searching for anything that could be of use. And Girwirt grumbled about the cold, as well as pretty much anything else that bothered him. But he mostly kept to himself, which meant that Jak had a lot of time to think. And that only led her down a spiral of negativity as she considered all the obstacles that they had to overcome to survive. If they didn't find any more caves, or a food source, they weren't going to survive out here for very long.

"I see something," said Perchel, alighting on her shoulder.

"What is it?" she said, hope rising despite her efforts to keep them down. It wouldn't do to get her hopes up.

"I'm unsure, but I think it's those disks again. But they're isolated ahead of us. All of them are appearing within a hundred yard radius of each other."

A few of the humans in her group shuffled their feet nervously at that pronouncement. Jak felt the hairs on her back prickle as well. "Alright, we'll avoid that area for now. We can stay here until they quit appearing, assuming they act like last time."

"There's more," said Perchel. "I think something's coming out of them this time."

Jak narrowed her eyes. That was something new, though the revelation tickled something in the back of her mind. "Straight ahead, you say?" she asked. Perchel nodded and she found herself moving forward. "Everyone else stay here. I'm going to get close enough to get a good look at what's happening."

No one argued with her. Perchel flew off her shoulder to guide her close to where the disks were appearing. Sure enough, Jak could make them out faintly, their light flashing a bright purple color across the snow. Lying in the snow were several dark shapes, not large enough to be anything more than objects the size of Jak's arm. Certainly not bodies or anything more substantial.

She found herself creeping forward to get a better look. But Perchel's warning held her back. "Jak, be careful. You're not as invulnerable as you once were."

Jak paused. Perchel was right. It wouldn't pay to risk her life in this situation. Not when she could wait for the phenomenon to pass.

And pass it did, though they had to wait a long time, longer than the last time the strange disks had begun appearing. Finally, the little bursts of light ceased, and Jak waited just a few minutes more to make sure they were not coming back any time soon.

"Go get the others, Perchel," she said. "Tell them it's safe now." Then she began closing the distance between her and whatever it was that had fallen out of the flashes of light.

Perchel flew away to get the others, leaving her alone. Soon, the dark objects in the snow grew larger and larger, until it became clear what they were. But...that was impossible.

When she finally arrived at the spot, she finally confirmed what she saw. They were arms, and legs, and in some cases even heads. Body parts of all kinds were strewn around her. But not just any body parts. The arms ended in long fingernails that resembled claws. And the heads were human in shape, but the skin was gray, the teeth were sharp and pointed, and the eyes were eerily human.

These were demon body parts.

But where had they come from? How had they emerged from the strange disks that kept flashing into existence? Perhaps they were coming from some other...

Suddenly, she recognized what the disks reminded her of. They were like the large portal she had created to reach Illadar in the first place. But they were much smaller, and didn't last for nearly as long. But that explained why there were demon body parts strewn all over the place.

"They're portals," she called out to Perchel and the rest as they rushed to join her.

"What's that?" said Girwrit, confused.

"The disks. They're portals like the ones I made to get here. They are probably coming from Earth."

"How could you know that?" said Perchel, hovering a few feet above the rest of them.

"Because these are demon body parts. They could only come from Earth."

"And how could that happen?" said Girwrit with an alarmed expression on his face, his small body unconsciously leaning away from the nearest body part.

"A portal could only come from the Pillars of Eternity," said Jak, a small knot forming inside her throat. "Which means it could be one of two things..."

"Either the Pillars of Eternity are acting on their own," replied Perchel, "Or..."

“Or someone is trying to use them to get here. But unsuccessfully it would seem.” She stared down at a demon head that lay near her feet.

“So Cain is trying to get here?” said Perchel, his voice soft as he realized the implications.

Jak nodded, “I would have to assume so.” Of course this wouldn’t be good news. Sure, she now understood what the strange disks were, though that didn’t make them any less dangerous, and now they knew that demons could potentially drop out of one if it managed to stay open long enough. Add to that the fact that if Cain finally managed to get the Pillars working properly, it wouldn’t be long before both planets were in ruin.

“At least we know that the Pillars aren’t fully working for him yet,” she said. “Otherwise he would be able to create a stable portal.”

One of the humans in her group spoke up. “But if he can do this much...”

“He’ll figure it out eventually,” Jak finished. “That just means we have to work hard to find a way to survive. Otherwise he will find us completely unprepared.”

What she didn’t confirm was that, if Cain did manage to come to Illadar, there would be no stopping him. Jak was no match against him, and even the combined power of the Fae and their human armies would not be enough. Seph and Gabriel were kind in their encouragement of Jak, to continue pressing forward and becoming an asset even without her brands. But all of that meant nothing in the face of what Cain could do.

“Let’s keep moving,” she said. “It looks like those portals open up within a certain radius of each other, so if you see them again, run away as fast as you can and you might get out of range.”

The others nodded before falling into step behind her. Well, all except Perchel who flew into the sky again. Jak noted with some trepidation that some of the humans were eyeing the Sky Fae warily. Trust for the Fae was wearing thin, even for those who were trying to help. Vander’s actions were beginning to have a much greater effect than she was comfortable with. It was affecting everyone.

Girwirt seemed to feel the discomfort as well, for he jogged to the front of their party to stand next to Jak. She acknowledged him with a nod before fixing her eyes on the path ahead of them. They were probably close to where Bretton and the others stood like frozen statues.

“Do you really like us? Or do you just need us for warmth?” It was Girwirt talking. Jak turned her head to stare at the little gnome. He stared back, not a hint of sarcasm on his face. He was being totally serious.

“I...of course I like you,” she said, a bit taken aback. “You know

that.”

“And yet now that we’re here in this place, where it’s cold, you suddenly rely on us to keep you all warm.”

Jak pressed her lips together, thinking carefully through her next words. Yes, Vander’s influence was reaching a lot of people. Even Girwirt, who despite all his sarcasm and generally crankiness, had up till now followed her without question, even he was doubting.

“You’re thinking this is like before? When the Watchers put you to work in Mt. Harafast?”

The gnome hesitated. “No, it’s not like that. You give us a choice after all. It just seems a bit concerning that we didn’t seem to matter to you before now.”

“What are you talking about, of course you matter?” Jak responded. “All of the Fae matter. And we build on each other’s strengths. Right now your strength is the most valuable for our current situation, but it’s not the only one. Flamedancers are working just as hard, and the Sky Fae are helping with the scouting.”

“Just us though. Most of the others are doing nothing.”

Jak was pretty sure ‘nothing’ was not a good word for it. Everyone was pitching in somehow, just not as much as the gnomes. “I can see your point,” she said carefully. “But you remember how important the trolls were in the battle against the queen, or how Li, Mosaial, and Bretton worked to prepare food in the valley before we arrived. Everyone has their moment. We all pitch in at some point.”

Girwirt ran a hand along his fiery hair. “Like the stories of what the Water Fae did at Skycliff,” he said, after pausing to think.

“Yes, exactly,” Jak confirmed. “And in a way, we were all instrumental in creating Illadar. I couldn’t have done it without each of you.”

At that, Girwirt let out a snort. “Hm, fat lot of good that did us. This place isn’t what any of us asked for.”

Jak peered out at the snow-covered rock. “I think that’s mostly because there are still more Fae to come, at least that’s what the Book of Illadar suggests. They might help.”

“Yeah, but where are they? You have so many humans with you, yet none of them have turned since we arrived. Maybe it’s because you lost your stick things.”

Jak had no answer to that. It was true that no one had turned into a Fae for some time. Not among their people at least. Why was that?

“Perhaps a lack of Relics is the reason,” said Jak. “But I’m not so sure. I have a feeling that we’ll learn more eventually. Perhaps the answer is just around the corner.”

“It had better be because I can’t walk as fast as you giants, and my legs are growing sore.” Girwirt huffed and pointed at his fast-moving,

stumpy feet.

Jak smiled. "Come here, Girwirt. I'll carry you for a bit."

She expected the gnome to protest, but after a moment's hesitation, Girwirt accepted her offer and she paused just long enough to stoop down and let the gnome climb onto her back. He was heavier than she thought he would be, but maybe she was just forgetting what it was like to not have her Strength brand.

They didn't say much more for a while, which was uncharacteristic of the gnome. He usually had something to say, even if it wasn't all that positive. Instead he clung to her back as she continued through the snow. There was something oddly comforting about having him there.

Before long, she spied a familiar giant boulder, though it was honestly hard to tell with the snow and wind changing the appearance of the landscape constantly, or covering it up. But yes, there was a specific rock that stuck out of the mountainside that she recognized. This had been the place where they'd found Bretton and his group frozen in place.

But as she scanned the area, she could see no sign of their frozen corpses.

**T**here wasn't any sign of a frozen body anywhere in sight. Had

she mistaken the location? No, this was definitely the same place. Perhaps the bodies had fallen over and were covered in snow.

Jak pulled up short, and called back to the others. "Let's pause here. The bodies of Bretton and his men were here before. Spread out and search through the snow to see if you can find them."

The others obeyed without further encouragement. Even Girwirt climbed off her back to help search.

Jak waved a hand at Perchel, who flew closer till he was facing her directly. In a low voice, she said, "Perchel, see if you can spot any standing statues in the surrounding area. I may have mistaken the spot because I don't see any sign of them here. Before, they were literally frozen while standing up."

Perchel frowned. "You think they got knocked down by the wind or something?"

"Possibly, but I want to make sure I didn't get the location wrong. I know it's close, so if you could just do a circle and see if you can find them nearby."

Perchel sharply inclined his head, "At once."

"And Perchel?" Jak added just before he was about to take off. She remembered her conversation with Girwirt, and needed to make sure Perchel didn't feel like he was being used either. "Thank you so much for all your help. We couldn't do any of this without you." Perchel smiled, "Thank you, Jak, and you don't have to worry about me. I don't speak for all of my kind, but I will follow you wherever you go. I got to see your true colors on Mt. Knot. I won't forget any of that."

Jak grimaced. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened since we got here. And for losing the Pillar you guarded for so long. You deserve better for following me."

"Let's just find more shelter or a food source, and then we'll have time to talk about what we deserve."

"I can get behind that," said Jak.

"I'll see if I can find the frozen scouts," Perchel added before flying



up and away. Jak watched him go. Perchel was a good person. The Sky Fae had only joined them relatively recently, but already they were an integral part of their group. She could only hope that most of them shared Perchel's healthy attitude.

They spent the next few minutes searching for the bodies of Bretton and the other scouts that had died with him. But try as they might, they found nothing. Not even a spare article of clothing. Had she been wrong about the location all along? There had to be a lot of rocky outcroppings like this one. But she had been sure it was the same one. And they'd been traveling the right amount of time. They should be here. Perhaps Skellig had retrieved them at one point and didn't tell her.

She looked back at the mountain to once again confirm that the rocky outcropping and nearby boulder were the same as she remembered. But this time, she spotted something different. She tensed up immediately as a shape moved among the slope of the mountain. A dark shape. It was running on all fours.

"Everyone to me," she called. Heads turned to look at her, then away to see what she was staring at. The dark shape was moving at an astonishing speed down the side of the mountain. And it was coming right for them.

"Is that..." began one of her human companions.

"It is," said another, this one a Sightseer. "That's a demon!"

Panic leapt into Jak's heart. A demon? Here? It must have come through one of those shortly-lived portals, making it through before it could close and cut through its limbs.

She glanced at the others. None of them had any combat brands. Jak didn't have her spear, or any other weapon for that matter. What had been the need? The only living beings on this planet were those of their group. Or so they thought.

"Does anyone have a knife?" she shouted. Her voice was shaking. She'd never been this defenseless against a demon. "Or a weapon of any kind?"

"I have," shouted the Sightseer. He extracted the tool from his belt, but it was clearly not a knife meant for combat. It was far too short. But it would have to do.

The demon was fast approaching, coming at them in a perfectly straight line. There would be no running. Jak thought she could hear it snarl as it charged.

"Everyone group together," she called out. Facing the Sightseer she said, "Whoever holds the knife should be at the front. I can take it."

"No, it's okay. I used to be a Watcher," the man said. "I can handle it."

Jak felt naked facing down a demon without a weapon in hand,

but she conceded. They bunched together just as the demon reached their position. But instead of leaping at the Sightseer who was closest, it flew through the air straight at Jak, who stood next to him.

Jak let out a short scream as its massive form toppled onto her, knocking her completely to the ground. Instinct took over and she placed both hands squarely on the demon's neck as it attempted to bite her. She had to keep its gnashing teeth away.

But she could do nothing about its arms. Its hands, ending in long claws, slashed at Jak's face and sides. Demon claws weren't particularly sharp, since they were essentially elongated human fingernails. But that did not mean it didn't hurt when several of them scraped across her skin. She cried out as the demon carved long gashes into her face, and she lifted her arms higher, trying to hold the demon's gnashing head away from her as much as possible.

Just then the demon yelped as the Sightseer's knife plunged into its side. The Sightseer withdrew the knife and stabbed again, and again. With each blow, Jak felt its attention on her waver and its strength falter. Finally, it collapsed entirely.

Jak lay beneath it for just long enough to catch her breath. Then she pushed it off and accepted the help of the Sightseer to rise to her feet. Her entire body was trembling.

Never had she felt so helpless as she had in that moment. The only thing that saved her was her training, keeping the beast from attacking anything vital.

Yet even in those few seconds after it leapt on her, and before it died, it had managed to cover her with scrapes on her arms and face. Those would need to be cleaned.

It came at no surprise that the demon attacked her first. If Cain was still controlling these beasts, then she would still be the primary target, even without her powers. She looked down at the demon's corpse. She remembered a time when she could take out an entire army of demons. Now...

"Look!" cried the Sightseer.

Jak followed his gaze back toward the mountain and her heart sank even further. Three more dark shapes were coming their way. This demon had not been alone.

"Get ready," she said, but her voice wavered. She wasn't sure they could take on three demons with only the one weapon. The first had been problem enough. "They will come after me. Be ready for that, and see if you can anticipate their moves."

Surprisingly, Girwirt stepped forward, towards the three oncoming demons. Before Jak could protest, he buried his hands in the snow to touch the ground beneath. A sharp hiss escaped the earth and the snow immediately changed form, most of it melting away and

steaming into the air.

“Go, Girwirt!” she called, realizing what he was doing. Perhaps he could create a barrier of some kind, or even catch the demons in molten rock.

The ground began to glow with a warm light, and gave off waving ripples of hot air. The ground in front of them was melting before their eyes as Girwirt worked his magic.

The demons slowed to a halt as they came close enough to spy the small barrier of molten earth. Even they were wise enough not to go crawling across the glowing fire. Or at least their master was. But even Girwirt couldn’t make a complete circle in the time they had, and the demons knew it. They began flanking them, with two moving to their left, and the third on their right, to bypass the lava threat and attack from two different directions.

Jak swallowed. All that to be flanked on both sides. Girwirt realized what was happening and picked up a handful of the lava, its heat doing nothing to the little gnome. With a great heave, he threw it at the nearest of the three demons. The beast leapt out of the way just in time, the lava falling just short of hitting it.

Jak braced herself. They were going to have to fight these demons directly, no matter what. She wasn’t sure she would make it out this time.

Suddenly, the air around them grew cold. Or rather, far colder than usual. The light of Girwirt’s lava pit dimmed as it came in contact with the cold air, and the mist of Jak’s breath became more pronounced.

But if she felt cold, it was nothing compared to the demons’ reactions. Each let out a yelp, and their bodies contorted. Actual frost began forming on their skins. It was like the cold Jak felt was actively targeting them. What was...

She stared all around and immediately saw something that hadn’t been there before. Several human forms stood a short distance away. One had both arms out, pointed at the demons, and a sort of wind was emanating out of his hands.

The demons continued screaming until the sounds turned into more of a whimper. Soon they were nothing but frozen husks in the snow.

By now, the rest of them had turned and seen the strange figures behind them. Jak could feel the tension coming from each of them. She swallowed. Those demons had frozen in an instant. Had these strange people been the cause of what happened to Bretton and the others? They had to be. But how had anything else living arrived on this planet? Had they come through a portal too?

She stepped forward, away from her fellow scouts and towards the

others. One of the strange beings moved forward as well. At least they weren't attacking them.

As she neared the newcomers, she could see that the person walking toward her was a man, or at least something very similar. But his skin was different than a normal human. He had a kind of blue-gray look, and snow seemed to fall on him and stay, instead of melting from his body heat. His hair and beard were a bright white, contrasting starkly with his skin.

There was something familiar about this person, whoever he was. Or at least, the way he walked and held himself seemed more like what she would expect from a human, despite the man's more unexpected characteristics.

But even as he came closer, more and more became familiar. He had on clothes that she recognized from people of their own group. And his face and beard...

"Bretton!" she cried as she finally recognized the man.

The gray-blue face split into a smile. "Jak," he said. "It's good to see you again. We weren't sure if the others had survived this long, or if you had all become like us."

"How?" was all she managed to say in response. "I found you before. You were dead. Frozen solid."

"More of a cocoon, I think," said Bretton. He still had that deep, strong voice. "I told you I have experience with such weather. It wouldn't take me that easily." He winked at her.

"But what happened?" Jak couldn't quite bring herself to believe that this was really Bretton. But there he was, clearly the man that had accompanied her, leading his own people from the valley to this planet.

"We're not entirely sure," he replied. "We were simply traveling before we suddenly found ourselves rooted to the spot, with ice forming all around us. But when it covered us completely, we were still able to breathe, and we quickly found our bodies adjusting to the cold in a way we had never felt before."

Something clicked in Jak's mind. "You've become a Fae," she said. "Sometimes the change is sudden like that. And what you did to those demons..."

"Ah yes, that was a little something we discovered shortly after coming loose from our icy prisons. We now have a certain knowledge of that which is cold. We're able to sense the building blocks of the world around us and make them slow down in a sense. It causes anything we desire to freeze. We can create temperatures far colder than what is natural, even on this planet."

"Incredible," said Jak. She glanced back at her fellow scouts. "You'll have to come explain everything to the others. I think they're

worried you'll freeze them like you did to the demons."

Bretton let out a hearty laugh. "Very well, we can diffuse those fears at least."

With a wave of his hand, Bretton signaled to the others of his

kind to come join them. As they approached, Jak noticed that they all had the same blue-gray skin and white hair. There were both men and women, all of the scouts that had accompanied Bretton in the first place.

They had to be Fae. That was undisputable. But what would they call this particular variety? Snow Fae? Ice Fae? The latter sounded better to Jak, but perhaps they had a name of their own that they wanted to use. And how had they formed? Was there a Relic buried nearby that had sparked their transformation? Somehow, Jak doubted that. Perhaps it was the planet itself, a planet that likely radiated magical energy so soon after its creation. The formation of new Fae species, thus far, had been unpredictable. Who was to say it happened the same way for these Ice Fae as it had for the others?

The reunion of Bretton with the others was heartfelt. One of Bretton's former followers was among those that accompanied Jak, and they were all happy to see that such a large group of people that were supposed to be dead, were in fact still alive. Only Girwirt seemed uneasy, though that was understandable, given the nature of Bretton's Fae powers, polar opposites of what gnomes were capable of doing.

"Ain't right," he said. "No one should have power over the cold. Too dangerous."

Jak looked down at the gnome and narrowed her eyes. "And just how is it any more dangerous than what you do?"

"Because it is, simple as that," responded Girwirt, as if that was sound reasoning.

Bretton turned his attention to the two of them. "Don't worry, little man. We bear no ill will towards you or your kin. In a way, we are very much alike. Our powers are not unlike your own but where you can create heat, we create frost."

Girwirt grumbled something about those two things being complete opposites. He said it under his breath but Bretton laughed anyway. "Yet we both deal in matters of climate and temperature.

None of the others could say the same. So perhaps we're more alike than you think." He then turned to Jak and asked, "So I assume we return to the camp?"

"I suppose so," Jak replied. "We were supposed to continue for a few more days, but now that we've found you, all that has changed. The others should also know that there's a chance of demon attacks."

"Good," said Bretton. "Our supplies are running low and we were about to return to the camp anyway, though some of us were afraid of doing so. I hope the others don't take our transformation as too much of a shock."

"Skellig won't, but I can't speak for the others, like the other humans from the valley."

"Those of my company will follow me, but I can't speak for the others." Bretton said, rubbing his icy chin.

"They've seen other Fae before, I imagine they would be okay with this."

"Yes, and many even seemed eager to become Fae. And we've become immune to the cold, which I imagine would be an attractive position right about now."

Jak nodded, "It would indeed. There have been...tensions since you left. Vander isn't letting most humans into the caves and things are escalating. Some good news is exactly what we need."

"Well then, we can only hope they take it as good news."

"Agreed," said Jak. "When do you want to set out?"

"Well, you say the others don't know of the demons falling from the sky?"

"They've seen those portals before, but to my knowledge they don't know about the demons, unless something has happened since I left."

"Then I suggest we leave now."



THEY ARRIVED BACK in the camp towards the end of the next day. Jak told the new Ice Fae to stay behind while she broke the news to Skellig. The major, to her credit, took the news very well. It was good to know that those they had presumed dead were still, in fact, alive. And not only that, but they didn't need shelter or warmth to survive in the cold.

The general public took more time to get used to Bretton and his crew, though they were encouraged when most of Bretton's tribe received him back with open arms. In fact, most of them were almost jealous of Bretton. He now had advantages that they did not have, one

that could spell the difference between survival on this planet and a cold death.

But what Jak really wanted to see was Vander's reaction to the news. He seemed to value the Fae so highly, so what would he say when he discovered that more humans had become Fae. Would he welcome them in the same way that he welcomed all the others? Not that the Ice Fae needed shelter in the caves, but perhaps they didn't need to tell Vander anything about that just yet.

Yewin agreed to enter the caves and ask Vander to come out for an audience with Skellig. Jak stood with the major at the mouth of the caves.

Yewin exited, and Jak held her breath. To her relief, she saw Vander emerge immediately after the Bright Elf, though his face bore a scowl, and a look that suggested they were wasting his time. Jak tried to catch his eye, but he was purposely not looking at her. Apparently he still held a grudge against her for their last conversation.

"What is it?" he said, striding forward until he was several feet away from Skellig. "Do you intend to shorten our rations again? I warn you that we will take them off your hands if you even attempt it."

Starting out with a threat. That wasn't a good sign at all. What would they do if Skellig increased the pressure on them? Would they kill the major? Shadow Elves made great assassins, but she couldn't think that even Vander would stoop that low.

Skellig, to her credit, remained calm. "We thought you should know about something that happened to some of our scouts." She waved a hand and the soldiers behind her parted to let Bretton and a few of the other Ice Fae through.

Vander's eyes narrowed as he took in their strange skin and white hair, but otherwise failed to react. "I assume you're going to claim these are some new type of Fae."

"They are. We're calling them Ice Fae, and they changed here on this planet."

"Well how convenient for you. Perhaps you won't die of exposure after all, but will turn into these Ice Fae. You see, there was no reason to fear."

Jak grimaced. Vander was not a fool. He recognized instantly that the Ice Fae would be immune to the cold, or close to it.

Bretton opened his mouth to speak. "And if that were true, and everyone became as we are now, would you welcome us?"

"There would be no need," replied Vander with a shrug. "You don't need the security of these caves. Perhaps they would even be too warm for you."



“But would you welcome them?” emphasized Jak. Vander turned his head slowly to look at her for the first time. She continued, “would you treat them as your own, and care for them in the same way that you claim to care for the rest of the Fae?”

The corner of Vander’s mouth twitched, and Jak knew she had finally caught him in a conflict. He wouldn’t accept people he considered, at least on some level, to be enemies, even when those enemies changed to become Fae, the people he claimed to defend.

“I do not have time for silly hypotheticals,” he said, half turning away from them. “When your entire company transforms into these Ice Fae as you call them, contact me again and then we’ll decide what to do.” He turned fully to head back into the caves.

Jak’s lips tightened into a thin line. She opened her mouth to retort. “There are demons here.”

That got Vander’s attention. He whirled around to face her. “What do you mean?”

“Those strange disks that appeared some days ago? They’re not random. They’re portals. Someone on earth is trying to open a stable gateway between our worlds, like what I used to bring us here. And they’re sending demons through.”

Vander advanced on her, taking slow, meaningful steps. “We did not see these portals that you describe. We only heard the commotion from inside.”

“I can confirm that they...” Yewin began.

“Shut up, Bright Elf!” barked Vander. Why did he look at Jak with such venom in his eyes?

“Yewin’s right. Anyone who was outside when it happened saw it. There are thousands of witnesses.” Jak folded her arms, trying to keep herself from backing down as Vander advanced on her.

“Human witnesses, and those loyal to them,” he shot a look of pure hatred at Yewin. Why was he so mad? What had Jak said to upset him so? Vander came closer. “And now, your Gifter friends would raise a demon army against me.”

“What?” It wasn’t Jak who spoke, but Skellig. She took three full steps toward Vander. “You honestly believe that we would stoop so low as to create demons just so we could...what? Kill you? Drive you out of the caves? We could do that with far less effort on our own.”

“I’d like to see you try, you pompous sack of self-righteous trash!” Vander spat. His hand strayed to his side where Jak knew his daggers were.

“Please!” she yelled. Neither Vander nor Skellig so much as glanced at her. “We can’t keep doing this. Vander, you know we would never raise a demon army. There are demons coming through portals, we’re telling the truth, and that’s it. If you don’t believe me,

all you have to do is wait and you'll see them for yourself." "I am done with you people," growled Vander, still not looking at Jak. "Always coming to me and begging for my assistance, or that of the others. I am done. For anyone who *truly* is Fae, and who renounces their allegiance to our oppressors, we will allow them to stay in the caves." He waved a hand at Bretton. "But I doubt this lot will need it, just as I doubt they would choose to ally with us."

And with that, he turned on his heel and strode back through the cave entrance, leaving the rest of them to gawk and wonder what had just happened.

The next few days went by without incident, at least compared

to what they had experienced recently. Jak waited with hope beyond hope for news from the other scouting parties. If even one of them brought news of another suitable shelter, they could potentially diffuse this situation with Vander.

But one by one, the scouting parties returned with nothing but dire news. Only one had discovered anything of value, a cliff overhang that provided some shelter from the elements, but not enough for all seven thousand of them. And it wasn't like a cave that could be insulated and heated from the inside. Still, it was something.

"Permission to send as many of our number as will fit," Jak said to Skellig once the scout had finished reporting. They were in Skellig's tent, along with a handful of others, including Yewin who had essentially been kicked out of the caves for his open allegiance to "the oppressors" as Vander put it. He was the only Fae to remain outside, other than the newly formed Ice Fae, and the trolls, who still seemed to care little about what was going on. They simply patrolled the camp, sometimes pausing in place for literal days.

"Permission denied," Skellig responded, her face grim.

"But—"

"I can't justify sending anyone away at the moment, not with Vander presenting such a threat."

Yewin jumped in, "I do believe he will leave us alone if we do not provoke him."

"Well it's too late for that," said Skellig.

"What do you mean?" asked Jak.

"As of today I am officially cutting off their food supply. I only waited these last few days so I could prepare for his inevitable response."

Jak's face went pale. "You're preparing an ambush."

Skellig nodded. "And it won't be easy. We're expecting some, if not all of the Shadow Elves to come out and steal what they can while disguising themselves. We've got Telekinetics, Strongarms, and a few

others ready to lock down that entire area of need be.”

“But you know he would consider that an act of war. People could die.”

Skellig took a slow step towards her, so that they faced each other head on. “Jak, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I can say with some certainty that yes, people will die. And there’s no getting around that. My priority now is to make sure that as few people die as possible. And that means seizing control of these caves.”

“Wait, what?” Jak said. “You said you were just cutting off their supplies. Now you want to take back the caves?”

“We need to teach Vander and anyone loyal to him that they don’t own such luxuries, physically superior as they are. A message must be sent that everyone has an equal right to those caves.”

Yewin spoke next, “I hate to say it, Jak, but I think Skellig is right. We can’t just allow Vander to continue down this path that he has chosen. It’s unfortunate, but he brought this upon himself.”

“But we’ve already lost so many in the fight against Cain, or against the queen. We can’t start fighting each other, no matter what the cost.”

“We have little choice in this matter, Jak.” responded Skellig, her face a mixture of sorrow and determination. “By not taking action, we will simply remain exposed to the elements until most of us die. Expanding the cave doesn’t do anyone any good if Vander will not permit access, and it cannot be expanded fast enough to prevent losing people out here in the cold.”

“And what if I were to offer you an alternative,” Jak replied hastily.

Both Skellig and Yewin paused, but they stared at her expectantly. “Such as?” Skellig said after a moment of waiting.

“Ah...” Jak hadn’t exactly thought this through, but she did immediately latch onto one theory that had been brewing for a while. “The portals,” she said. “We know that demons have managed to come through.”

“So you say,” interrupted Skellig. “We have yet to see any of these demons ourselves.”

“I know, but that’s probably because very few make it through. I wouldn’t be surprised if the four that we fought with were the only ones, and besides, they can only come through wherever the portals are appearing, and that could be anywhere.”

“So how does this help us?” asked Yewin. He didn’t seem impatient when he said it. In fact, he was considering her with a curious expression on his shining face.

“Well, if demons can come through from Earth to Illadar. Maybe we could find a way to use them to get from Illadar back to Earth.”

Now Skellig understood. She tilted her head back and nodded slightly in comprehension. "I see. And your plan would be..."

"To retrieve the Pillars of Eternity for starters," said Jak. "And possibly send more food and medicine back here, as well as any other resources we lack."

For a moment, it almost looked like they were considering her proposal. Yewin rubbed his chin with his hand, and Skellig stared off into space for a time, thinking it through, before finally meeting Jak's eyes again.

"I'm sorry, Jak. But that is too much of a long shot. If you want to figure out how it can be done, then by all means go for it. But we can't delay our plans against the Shadow Elves just because you have a theory, one that would take time and involves too many unknowns."

Jak's heart sank, "We can't fight each other," she said, desperate now. "Any other option is worth the risk."

"I'm afraid I don't see any other choice. You don't even know where those portals are going to appear, and none of them stay open long enough for anyone to get through."

Jak opened her mouth to protest further, to say that they could not shrug aside the portals, since they represented a threat from Cain. If the demon king managed to create a stable gateway between their worlds, they would have far more threatening things to deal with than Vander and his hatred of humans.

But she stopped herself. She couldn't really blame Skellig after all, given the circumstances. There had been a time when she thought all conflict could simply be resolved with patience and love. But sometimes love required conflict when one side would not budge. If Vander remained hostile, they had no choice but to fight him, to give up lives in the hope that it would ultimately save more.

And she didn't even have much of a plan with her theory about the portals. Even if she were to get through one, what would that accomplish? If Cain was creating the portals, she would probably end up right where he was, and then what would she do? Without her brands, she couldn't fight him. He would likely kill her on the spot.

In the end, she nodded her head. "I'll try to find a way to make my theory work, but you do whatever you feel is necessary, Skellig. Though I don't want this, I trust you. You'll do the best that you can, I know it."

Skellig gave her an appreciative nod and smile. "Thank you, Jak. You know, you don't have to take this all on yourself. You're essentially a normal human now. Maybe you should take a break and spend time with Seph. We can handle the hard business."

Jak began walking to the front of the tent. It was time to leave. "I appreciate that, Skellig. But I'll have to decline. I think it would be

even more of a weight on my mind if I *wasn't* doing all I could to help. I realize I don't have the same physical strength as before, but that does not mean I can't make a difference."

With that, she stepped outside to the open air.

And froze.

In the split second after leaving the tent, she'd spied a puff of darkness just to one side. The moment she turned her head to look, it was gone. But she recognized what had just happened. She bent down to survey the ground and felt her heart freeze with realization. There were footprints in the snow, light ones, extremely light. But it was unmistakable.

A Shadow Elf had been spying on them.

Based on the footprints, the elf had already left, probably just now. But perhaps it had just gone a short distance away and would be back soon. She had to warn Skellig.

She immediately retreated back through the tent flap. Skellig looked at her confused. "Did you..." she began, but stopped as Jak put a finger to her lips.

Jak glanced around the tent. The others that gathered here to share warmth could not know what she had just seen. But that would not stop them from wondering what she was doing, telling Skellig to be quiet. They would speculate. Well there was nothing that could be done about that now.

Silently, she approached Skellig till she was right next to the major. Then she leaned in close, with Skellig bending down to hear better. "There was a Shadow Elf spy outside the tent," she whispered just loud enough so that only Skellig could hear.

Skellig leaned away and looked at Jak sharply. "You're sure?"

Jak nodded.

Skellig swore and ran a hand through her short hair. But she too realized that making this known to their listeners would incite a panic. She calmed herself down in a rush. "Thank you for telling me, Jak. If there's nothing else?"

Jak shook her head. "No, major. I'll be going now."

She retreated back out the tent flap. They would have to assume that the Shadow Elf had overheard everything about their plans to withhold the rations from the Fae, and ambush them when they came to steal it. That changed everything.

Jak made her way to where her own tent lay. Seph was sitting there waiting, doing some physical exercises to keep himself warm. If Jak hadn't been so preoccupied with her discovery of the Shadow Elf, she would have allowed herself to watch him work. He looked good when he was doing pushups.

Instead, she walked right into her tent and found the small patch

of ground that was hers. Her tent wasn't really *her* tent anymore. It was the largest besides Skellig's, which meant that they could fit over a dozen people in it, when lying right next to each other. She couldn't count how long it had been since she'd had some privacy.

She slipped into the blankets of her own, small space. It wasn't exactly time to sleep, but she needed to conserve warmth. Not to mention have a quiet moment to think. Well, as quiet as possible under the circumstances. There were several others in their blankets after all. She wouldn't get time alone. Not without leaving the camp entirely.

Seph, who must have noticed her entering the tent, wandered next to her and followed suit, sitting and then pulling his own covers over him so that he lay immediately to her right. She could feel the warmth coming from his body.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she responded, not sure what else to say.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "You came in looking like a spooked panther."

"Is that one of those cat-like things in the east?"

"You've heard of them?"

"Got attacked by one actually," she said. "In my second vision on Mt. Knot. Long story. But yeah, things aren't exactly the best right now."

In a hushed tone so as not to alert the others, she filled him in on everything that had happened. He listened without interrupting, waiting until she had completely finished explaining how she'd found out about the eavesdropper and what that could mean.

"Well I suppose Skellig will have to change her tactics now," he said when she finished.

"Yes, probably," Jak let out a groan of frustration. "I wish I knew how all of this was going to end. Not knowing is killing me."

"Just as long as it's not frost exposure that's killing you," he said with a wink. "I'm not sure what I'd think if you turned all gray and blue like your friends."

Despite herself, Jak let out a short laugh. "I'm not sure I would change into a Fae. With all my exposure to various Relics you'd think it would have happened by this point."

"Well I haven't changed into anything either," he replied. "But we both know that the Book of Illadar prophecies even more races. Even after these Ice Fae."

Jak rolled over on one side so she was facing him, and leaned her head against one arm. "Tell me more of those prophecies." Perhaps hearing of what was supposed to happen might help calm her nerves, even if prophecy was more of a guessing game. It was easier to see in

hindsight, to recognize a prophecy fulfilled. But it was less easy to accurately anticipate the future.

“Well, we recently witnessed the birth of the Ice Fae,” he said. “Those that will come in the greatest hour of need, a time of contention.” he said. “I would think that now pretty much counts as such an event.”

“Does it say if they will be able to help with that contention?” Jak asked.

“It doesn’t,” he said. “In fact, very few races have anything more substantial attached to their prophecy. There are only three more to come. Two that represent life of some kind.”

Jak nodded. “That would make sense why the planet has no life on it besides us. Those two Fae were not there when we linked and created Illadar.”

Seph returned her nod. “That was my thought as well.”

“It’s too bad one of them didn’t show up before the Ice Fae. We could really use some vegetation at least, something we could grow and eat. Apart from the mushrooms at least. We don’t have enough space to grow more of those.”

“Perhaps, though I get the feeling that we are meant to solve our own problems before the answers will be provided for us.”

“You mean we need to create our own food before we can have some type of Fae do it for us? The gnomes were already successful at growing mushrooms.”

“I don’t mean anything so specific. Just that...you know how at each step of the way, we’ve met opposition. Well I have a gut feeling that we’re supposed to have that. Like it’s a test to build us up, and prove ourselves worthy of possessing this planet.”

“You make it sound like all we have to do is get through the hardship and there won’t be any more problems.”

“Well, no. We can still fail.” “And what happens if we do?”

“Then others will rise to take our place.”

Jak paused to take in his beautiful face for a moment. “You really believe in Illadar, don’t you. Even after coming here and realizing it wasn’t the paradise we thought it would be.”

He nodded, “I do. I just don’t assume I will live to see that day. Perhaps we will fail, and Cain will triumph for a time. Perhaps he will even destroy this entire planet. But someone will rise up again, someone more capable. And they will rebuild. But it will happen eventually, of that I’m certain.”

“You don’t exactly inspire confidence in our current chances.”

“Perhaps only because I am content with the life I have. Despite all this, I’m with you. And that’s all I could ask for. It is more than I thought I deserved.”



He looked at her with such warmth as he said it that she almost had to fight back tears. "I love you, Seph," she said, after making sure she was composed.

He smiled, "I love you too, Jak."

Jak reached over to grab his face and pulled him into a hard kiss. They held it for a while. Probably long enough that anyone else in the tent was growing uncomfortable. But eventually they let each other go. Seph smiled and brushed the red streak of her hair away from her face. Relics, she loved this man. She was going to find a way for them all to survive if for no other reason than to be with him.

The tent flap opened and a head poked in. It was Bretton, his white hair shimmering in the light. His eyes quickly located Jak. "I'm sorry to intrude, but they wanted you to come quick."

"Skellig?" Jak asked. What did the woman want from her? She had only just left.

"No, not Skellig," said Bretton. "They want you where they're tending to the sick."

A chill ran up Jak's spine. Gabriel.

Both she and Seph hurried until they reached the tent where

they were keeping the sick. There were more bodies here than before, packed in as closely as possible. Any more and they would have to use another tent.

It didn't take Jak long to find Gabriel buried under as many blankets as they could spare. Which unfortunately wasn't many. She rushed to the man, with Seph and Bretton following close behind.

"How is he?" she said to the nearest healer, a woman bent over a nearby patient, spoon feeding him some soup. The woman turned to see who had spoken. Jak was not surprised to see it was Li. She did not look much better than those who were sick in bed, but she was still on her feet.

The woman gave a slight nod of acknowledgment to Jak, but answered her question straight away. "He will not live out the night. We have done all we can do."

Jak's eyes widened. Gabriel couldn't die. He was the only one left. He was...well he was Gabriel. Her teacher, her guide, the only family she had now that her blood family was gone.

"Talk to him," said Seph, softly from behind. There was an air of resolution in Seph's voice, a soberness. He had already accepted it. No. Gabriel couldn't die. She could save him, she could...

"Gabriel," she said, her voice shaking. She knelt next to the man's side, trying to avoid treading on the bodies of others that lay next to him.

"Jak," he barely managed to croak out the word. "I'm glad you could be here."

"Gabriel, you have to tell me how to get rid of this Void brand. Then I could save you. Please, there has to be something, anything that you know of."

"There..." Gabriel broke off as a fit of coughing racked his body. When it subsided, his lips were stained with blood. "That is beyond my knowledge. You must remember what I told you. You must believe in yourself."

“How will that help me bring you back?”

“I am already gone. But it is my time. I do not regret it. I lived to see the day when Illadar became a reality. When the Pillars of Eternity, the Worldbringers, were wielded by a person of legend, and one of my students no less. I could not be prouder.”

His face was paler, and Jak could feel her own visage growing colder. “No, Gabriel. You have to hold on. Just a little longer. We’ll get you some help, we only need time. Other Fae will come, you’ll see. Or we’ll find shelter.”

“Jak,” he said, and the tone of his voice silenced what she was about to say. The raspiness of his voice was gone, temporarily. He spoke in a clear tone. “You can’t save everyone. But just remember, there are more out there you have yet to save. Do not give up. You are not done.”

He held her gaze for a moment before his eyes fluttered closed and his body relaxed. Jak’s eyes widened. “Gabriel,” she cried. “Gabriel!”

Her teacher’s jaw went slack, and his eyes stared upward. His face was ashen, devoid of all color.

Jak reached for him, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking his limp body, she felt hands gently coax her away. They were Seph’s hands. Li stepped into Jak’s field of vision, reaching a palm forward to close Gabriel’s eyes. This wasn’t happening. Gabriel couldn’t die!

She found herself in Seph’s arms, her face and hands pressed against his chest, his arms surrounding her. Huge sobs shook her body, and tears streamed down her face. She barely noticed as he led her out of the tent and away through the camp. And through it all, she cried and cried.

Never before, not even at the death of her mother, had she reacted this way. It was as if all of her emotions that had been bottled up for years suddenly came flooding out of her. All she could do was weep. But she wasn’t just weeping for Gabriel. She was weeping for all of them. Her mother, her father, her friends, even those that had died by her hand. All who had been caught up in the treachery of Cain, or the deceit of the queen. All that had died from following her.

Every soul weighed against her, and found her wanting.

“I cannot keep doing this,” she choked through her sobs. Her voice was strained.

“You can,” said Seph, holding her even tighter. “You heard Gabriel’s last words. You are not done yet.”

She shook her head violently. “I can’t. People will just keep dying. Because of me.”

Seph very wisely did not answer that. Perhaps he knew that it would do no good. Not like this. So he merely held her close, leading them to the edge of camp where they could be free of spying eyes.

What did the others think, seeing their former leader break down like this? Would they too finally realize that there was no hope?

Seph continued holding her until they were some short distance away from the camp. Bless him. He knew exactly what she needed. And right now that was being away from the prying eyes. They sat against the side of a foothill, away from everyone except one of the trolls who stood as still as a statue, ignoring the snow. Seph gave her the silence she needed.

"I shouldn't have listened to him before we came. He didn't want any brands, but I should have given him Healing at least."

Seph let that sink in a bit before responding. "I also have no brands. I am still here. He was old, he lived a good life."

"I don't want to hear any of that," she said, a little more forcefully than she intended. "There is more I could have done."

"Perhaps, but that's not what happened, was it?" She faced him, her cheeks flushed with tears and anger. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"We can't mourn over what could have been, because that does nothing to advance the present. We can, we must, learn from our mistakes but move on."

Jak wiped her nose and sniffed. "How am I supposed to do that? I thought I was making some progress in helping the gnomes expand the caves, but turns out that was not enough. I can't do anything without the brands."

"You know that's not true."

Jak hung her head and another bout of sobs wracked her body. She did know. She was just saying things, trying to justify the moment in her mind, to blame something, even if that blame lay on herself.

"You're not done, Jak." Seph said, his voice still that calm, smooth softness. How could he keep it together like that?

"I don't even know what that means," she responded. "Done with what? I can't exactly change anything anymore. Vander won't even listen to me, and Skellig only does so when it's convenient."

Seph pointed at her Gifter brand, then moved his hand up to point at her Flamedancer brand, then one by one he pointed to the others. "Because of these. You may not have those abilities anymore, but you are still the first person in centuries to have them at all. You will forever be a beacon of hope."

"For all the good it will do me." She mumbled bitterly.

"You are still the same person that did all those amazing things, Jak. You may have lost your brand powers, you may have lost your friends and family, but you have not lost what makes you, you."

Her face was still hot with grief and rage. But her body relaxed just a bit at hearing him talk. She leaned in so that she was hugging him

close, as close as it was possible to do.

A rumble from one side sounded as the troll moved for the first time. It took two enormous steps in their direction and placed one hand lightly on Jak's head. She almost laughed despite herself. Now that the troll was closer, and its movements had shaken off the snow that had accumulated on itself, she recognized it as Rael, the troll she had named after her father.

"Thank you, Rael," she said. For some reason, the huge Fae's attempt at comfort helped more than anything that could have been said with words. Seph was staring up at the troll, smiling as if thanking the troll with his eyes.

They sat there for a while, Jak wiping the tears out of her eyes, the troll simply standing there, as if guarding them from further grief.

But it was short lived. The troll's head swung to one side to stare back at the camp. In that same instant, a sound of shouting reached Jak's ears. Something was happening back at the camp.

She and Seph stood and peered around the troll to see what it was. There were people there, crowding around the entrance to the caves. She couldn't see much from this distance, but the light glinted off of something. The people were carrying weapons.

"We have to get back," she said to Seph, who nodded. They would have to continue grieving for Gabriel later.

Jak didn't watch to see if Seph was following, but instead ran back to the camp as fast as she could. To her surprise, she heard the heavy thuds of footsteps, indicating Rael was following as well.

The humans were carrying weapons, though some held farming equipment and other tools that were brought through the portal at the beginning. They were pushing into the bottleneck of the cave openings, shouting and waving their weapons above their heads.

Silently, she cursed herself for having put on such a display of sorrow in front of everyone. Could her reaction have sparked this?

She could not see what the Fae were doing about the mob, but she knew it couldn't be good. Just as she thought about Vander's reaction, her worst fears flew in her face.

Screams from the front of the mob echoed across the landscape and she saw many of them jump back in fright. They were being pushed back. Though the Fae were small in number, they were a match for dozens of the ordinary humans. Only those with combat brands would even stand a chance.

But there were people with combat brands. Jak caught sight of flames above the heads of the people, emanating no doubt from some former Watchers, or others of the Flamedancers that they had brought with them, or branded since arriving. Jak redoubled her pace.

Within seconds, she reached the edge of the crowd. "Let me

through!" she yelled.

But this time, no one listened. They were all brandishing their makeshift weapons, and screaming at the Fae to let them in. Jak glanced around, trying to find Skellig. But could the major have any chance at talking these people down? More were joining them, inspired by what they saw their companions doing. They bumped into Jak, jostling her first one way, then another.

"Please..." she called out as they rushed past her. "Stop this."

But they did not stop, or even listen. Shouts of "let us in," or "drive them out," surfaced from all around her.

Finally, Jak caught sight of some Fae. The Sky Fae were emanating out of the caves, rising up into the air like a flock of birds. Then they changed direction and sped towards the rioting crowds. Spears and pitchforks rose to meet them, but the Sky Fae were expecting that. They dodged and grabbed hold of what weapons they could, wrenching them away with the surprising speed and strength of their small bodies and wings.

But weapons weren't the only things the Sky Fae took. A few flew down in pairs and picked up members of the mob and lifted them into the air, flying higher and higher until...

Jak gasped, putting her hands to her mouth as she saw the first of the rioters dropped to his death. The Sky Fae were actually going to kill some of the mob.

Jak pushed forward as fast as she could. She had to get to Vander. To tell him to stop this madness. This time she pushed forward with greater ease. The mob was beginning to scatter now that the Fae were applying real pressure.

She managed to make her way to the front, and chaos surrounded her on all sides.

Shadow Elves were weaving in and out of the people, disappearing, and reappearing with their obsidian daggers embedded in the sides of unlucky men and women. All blood fled from Jak's face as she watched the carnage unfold. How had it come to this? She stood in place, not a weapon in hand, just as a Shadow Elf materialized in front of her. It wasn't Vander, but Viona. The elf raised one of her dark daggers, readying it to plunge down into Jak's heart. But she stopped short, recognizing who she faced.

Jak did nothing to defend herself. She had no weapon to use anyway. But the elf only paused for a moment before disappearing once again, leaving Jak unscathed.

Well, at least some of the Shadow Elves still respected her to some degree.

She tried to find Vander among the others, but could not make out faces for most of the Shadow Elves as they dodged attacks and landed their own.

"Stop!" she yelled as loud as she could. A few Fae glanced at her, and just as many hesitated. But with that hesitation came death. To her horror, Jak watched as a handful of Flamedancers burned a Shadow Elf alive, and set fire to a Sky Fae's wings. Others of the dead lay on the ground. Humans were not the only casualties.

"Jak," said a deep voice from behind her. She turned to see Bretton approaching her with long strides, his snow-white hair blowing in the wind, and a determined expression on his face. "I can help. Get as many as you can away from the entrance."

Jak didn't hesitate. She began screaming at everyone who would listen to move away from the caves. Most that heard her listened, and once they began to retreat, others followed suit. They didn't want to remain exposed to the Fae.

Bretton strode forward, with a handful of other Ice Fae following behind him. Most let them pass. They knew that the Ice Fae were not with the Shadow Elves, but that didn't stop some of them from fingering their weapons. In the chaos of battle, would the Ice Fae be

protected from a mob such as this?

The Ice Fae raised their hands high above their heads, and a dreadful cold settled around them. Moisture in the air collected and fell as small ice crystals. Many of those crystals flew together and formed larger crystals. Snow, kicked up by the commotion, began moving under a mysterious wind that swept from the Ice Fae.

Jak watched, her mouth hanging open slightly as moisture joined with snow, and began to form a wall. It spread across the mouth of the caves, forming surprisingly quickly given the fact that the Ice Fae appeared to be drawing from natural elements. Yet even so, the wall of ice seemed to form as if out of thin air, quickly covering the entrance to the cave and then reinforcing itself with layer upon layer of ice.

All of the human population remained on the outside of the wall, as well as a few solitary Fae who had led the counter-assault on the mob. Yet all were watching the Ice Fae at work.

"No one will go in or out," said Bretton in a strong voice for all to hear. "Until we can resolve this peacefully."

The few Shadow Elves who remained, disappeared in a puff of shadow. They knew they could not win alone. Likely they were escaping for the time being. Sky Fae were doing the same, flying away and up along the mountains.

For the first time since it had all began, silence filled the area.

Then a sharp thud sounded from the other side of the ice barrier. Someone was banging their fists and shouting through the ice. Jak cautiously moved closer to hear who was speaking. "You can't hold us back forever!" Shouted Vander from the inside. Jak sniffed. He hadn't even exited the caves to help his comrades. "We will get through."

Jak turned to look at Bretton who, with his comrades, were still reinforcing the wall with more ice. "He's got the help of the gnomes. They'll be able to melt through an ice wall like this in no time."

"Perhaps, but we have some advantages over the gnomes," said Bretton. "Or at least, I think we have. Gnomes have to touch their subjects, we do not. Probably nature's balance for heat being ultimately stronger than frost. If we continue reinforcing this wall, I don't expect the gnomes to melt through it any time soon."

Jak nodded and took a deep breath. "I hope you're right."

"Do you hear me!" said Vander again from within.

"Ignore him," said Jak. "He doesn't need anyone fueling his hatred any more than we already have. Keep up the barrier."

She retreated, clutching at her arms and doing her best to think straight. The sight of bodies on the ground, both human and Fae, did not do much to ease her troubles.

She spied Seph a small distance away. And with him sat Skellig on



a supply wagon. The major did not look happy. But neither did she look like the leader Jak was used to seeing. Her back was hunched over, her hands on her knees. A look of defeat on her face.

"I'm sorry, Jak," she said as Jak drew closer. "There wasn't much I could do. Gabriel's death, on top of everything else. It was the last straw."

"You've managed to hold it off for this long," said Jak. "I don't blame you." And honestly she didn't. It was something of a miracle that they had avoided a mob forming for so long. Now if they could just find a more permanent solution than what the Ice Fae were doing.

"We need to do something," said Jak. "There are Shadow Elves out there somewhere, and the people will live in fear until they are captured, killed, or we make peace. I'd prefer the latter."

"I don't know what to do, Jak," said Skellig. "Our supplies will not last another week as it is. Shelter is not even the greatest of our concerns. Even if we were protected from the elements, we can't last without enough food for thousands of people."

"Perhaps the mushrooms the gnomes have managed to grow?"

"Yes, that could work if we had the soil and climate to grow thousands of them. We simply do not have that, Jak. We can't grow an army's worth of food in just a few short days." She looked off into the distance. "We're all going to die out here."

Unbidden, Gabriel's final words came to Jak's mind. There were more people for her to save. She met Seph's eyes as he stood quietly behind the major. Something passed between them.

Surprising even herself, Jak opened her mouth and laughed. It was the first time she had done so in weeks. Skellig stared at her, as did everyone close enough to watch. They probably thought she had gone crazy. But she didn't care. She laughed and laughed until her sides were sore.

She had finally figured it out. Even if she did have her brands again, she couldn't solve all their problems. She couldn't create food out of thin air. The most she could have done was give everyone a Hungerless brand, but she couldn't have done that seven thousand times, and it would have only delayed the inevitable.

Right now they needed solutions that did not involve her brands at all. They involved leadership, survival skills, and a small measure of luck. And Jak had enough run ins with bad luck recently. Which meant it was time for their fortunes to swing back the other way.

"I need to speak to the Triad and Yewin if he's still here. And any other Fae that might still be alive on this side. We're the only members of the council who are left, at least on this side of the caves."

Skellig narrowed her eyes at Jak's sudden change in tone. But she stood and faced Jak head on. "I'll see who all remains. Yewin was in

my command tent the last I saw him.”

With an encouraging nod from Jak, Skellig turned and marched away to find Yewin. Seph and Jak began walking back to the cave entrance to find Bretton.

“You’re doing it,” said Seph as they walked. “I told you there was still more for you to do.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Mourning over Gabriel’s death won’t bring him back, and it won’t save anyone else either.”

“So you’re pushing ahead,” he said. “You’re forgetting about the negative and pushing forward with the proactive approach.”

Jak shook her head. “Not forgetting. If we don’t remember people like Gabriel, and Karlona, and Rael, and Elva, we will never create a world that is better. They serve as examples of what to strive for, a place where people only die after living long and happy lives, surrounded by loved ones.”

“I think you could argue that’s exactly what happened to Gabriel,” said Seph.

Jak allowed a soft smile to touch her lips. “Perhaps. I hope he thought so. But we can still do better. People will always get sick. But we have to do what we can to minimize those problems.

They arrived back at the cave entrance. Bretton and the other Ice Fae, all of them now, were still busy throwing up layer after layer of ice on the barrier. It had to be several feet thick by now.

“Bretton,” said Jak as they approached. “We need to talk.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, his face contorted in concentration. “The gnomes have already begun heating the inside of the wall. We’re trying to cool the ice as fast as they can melt it.”

“And can you?”

Bretton tilted his head from side to side as if weighing the options. “We’re holding for now. But I can’t guarantee that we can keep it up for forever. We’ll run out of strength eventually.”

Jak nodded, “Well let’s just hope that the same happens to them. What you’re doing is key to keeping everyone from killing each other until we can find more solutions.”

Footsteps approached, and Jak turned to see Yewin arriving, with Skellig following close behind. In the distance she could also see Li and Mosaial on their way. With Seph by her side, that made up all the remaining members of the council that were still on this side of the ice barrier.

Jak spared a moment to look at them all. They were hardly a council anymore. Gabriel was dead, and representatives from the Shadow Elves, Water Fae, Sky Fae, gnomes, and dwarves were all beyond their reach at the moment. This would have to do.

“Skellig has just informed me,” Jak started out. “That we only have

a week's worth of food left." It was a little awkward addressing everyone like this. Physically and in terms of magical abilities, she was the weakest of the lot. But somehow they were all still here, listening.

No one batted an eye at the pronouncement that they were nearly out of provisions. They were expecting it to happen eventually.

"And it's only the latest in a line of problems," she continued, raising her fingers to begin ticking them off. "We still have to find shelter. There's Vander and his aggressions, which I think we can all agree is the more immediate threat."

"Immediate, yes," said Yewin. "But solving that problem will do little to help us in the long run."

"I agree," Jak said. "Plus there's also those strange portals that keep opening up here and there, potentially dropping demons into the mix."

Skellig nodded, "And there's the inevitability that the people will rise up again like they did moments ago."

Jak gazed back at the camp. Most of the mob had dispersed once the ice wall had gone up. But there were still many who lagged behind, throwing venomous looks in their direction. She could only hope that those looks were for Vander and the attackers on the inside, and not for Ice Fae or the members of the council.

"I think we could solve that problem by solving one or more of the others," said Yewin. "I'm simply unsure how we could do that."

"Well, Bretton and the Ice Fae have given me one idea," said Jak. Bretton looked away from his ministrations at the ice barrier to look at her.

"And what might that be?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, I think it's kind of obvious actually. If your people are capable of creating a barrier like this one," she waved at the wall that still held at the mouth of the cave, "then perhaps you could create a shelter for the rest of us."

Yewin raised his head in understanding, and Skellig began nodding slightly to herself.

"There are not enough of us to do that, and maintain this barrier," replied Bretton. "You'd be trading one problem for another."

Jak tightened her jaw. "Yes, I figured that would be the case. But you already said you couldn't hold back the gnomes forever. I think your powers would be put to better use by creating shelter for the others."

Skellig spoke up. "So what do we do, then, if Vander comes out ready to slaughter us all? We can't exactly fix things by saying we have shelter now and therefore don't need to bother him anymore. There's still the issue of food. I wouldn't put it past him to try and take

what we have left for himself.”

Jak took a deep breath. “Yes, I know. As much as it pains me to say it, I think Vander is beyond the point of saving. He was my friend once, but scarcity has brought out the worst in him.”

“Yes,” said Yewin. “I doubt we’ll have any luck bringing him over to our way of thinking.”

“And if we kill him,” said Jak. “it will mean war with the Shadow Elves. We might win, but it will come at a huge cost. And we would be, essentially, wiping out one of the races. We’d have little luck convincing the others to be on our side if we stoop to that level. We need to think differently. Set an example.”

“So what do you propose we do?” Skellig asked.

Jak said her next words slowly, for emphasis. “I’m going to challenge him to single combat.”

Seph whipped his head around to gaze at her, sharply. For a moment, no one said anything. Even Bretton stopped what he was doing to turn his attention to her.

"You know you'll never beat him," said Skellig in a low voice.

"I know, I'm not what I once was," she said. "But I'm also not defenseless. I have Watcher training."

"And the Shadow Elves are the best assassins among the Fae. You'll never even see the blade that stabs you." Skellig had her arms folded, skeptical but not throwing out the idea entirely. That was a start.

"He may not have realized yet that we can create our own shelter," Jak said. "If I lose, we can set the condition that all of us will leave and agree never to attack the caves again. If I win, we get control of the caves and take him prisoner."

"And you're sure he'll agree to this? What would stop him from breaking his oath?" Yewin remarked, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"He's driven by self-interest, but he's not stupid. He knows that all out war with us will mean certain death for most of his people, even if they manage to kill hundreds of us in the process. He'll agree to fight me because he'll see it as a sure win."

"Which it will be," said Skellig. "No offense, Jak. But your strengths are no longer in the area of combat. Let me be the one to challenge him."

Jak shook her head. "Vander doesn't respect you. And you actually have a chance at beating him. He won't take that risk. But he still respects me at some level, or at least he respected my mother. As do the rest of the Shadow Elves. I'm confident that if I win, the others would follow me."

Seph was shaking his head by her side. She looked at him, tilting her head to silently ask him what he thought.

He gave her a look that clearly communicated he did not like the idea. But what he said was, "Jak, I trust you. I don't like it, but I trust you. Just...try not to get killed. Vander might not hold back."

“Indeed,” said Yewin. “I think it’s likely that he will try to kill you, Jak, even with the respect he had for Karlona.”

Jak nodded, slowly. “Then I will live on as a martyr, and someone else will finish my job for me.”

Seph closed his eyes, and a single tear ran down his cheek. For the first time, Jak faltered in her plan. She was willing to die if she thought it would save the group, but could she really do that to Seph? Yet if Seph really didn’t want it, why wouldn’t he fight against her plan? He must truly trust her.

“We still haven’t addressed the issues of food, or the portals.” Skellig pointed out. “What good will any of this do if we can’t eat, or if Cain comes here himself to destroy us all?”

Jak faced the major. “One problem at a time, Skellig. But if we can create new shelters using the ice, or take control of the caves, we can attempt at an aggressive expansion of the mushroom crops. Mushrooms grow quickly, so perhaps there would be a chance for many if not most of us to survive.”

“And the portals?” Skellig raised an eyebrow.

Jak faltered. “We’ve talked about this. If they open one direction, they could also serve as a doorway back to Earth. Then we’d have a chance at retrieving the Pillars of Eternity and fixing all the other problems we have.”

“Yes,” Skellig said, “but we also discussed the problems with that theory. If we were to end up on the other side, we’d run straight into Cain, or whoever is opening those portals.”

Jak nodded, “There is one species of Fae that would make that problem less of an obstacle.”

Comprehension dawned on Skellig’s face. “The Shadow Elves.”

Jak nodded. “They are crucial for all of this to work.”

For once, Skellig looked convinced. She put her hands on her hips and stared at the ground. “Alright. Then I suggest we get the word to him sooner or later. You’ll need to present your challenge to him directly.”

“I know,” said Jak. “I guess I’ll just need some time to get ready.”

The others nodded. Bretton simply said. “We’ll remain here for the time being. We should be able to...” he broke off, turning to look at the barrier. Several of the other Ice Fae also stopped what they were doing, their arms hanging loosely at their sides rather than expelling that frost-like substance at the barrier.

“What is it?” asked Jak. She wasn’t ready to fight Vander just yet.

“They’ve stopped,” said Bretton. “I can’t feel the ice melting anymore.”

Jak tiptoed closer, till she was facing the ice barrier. There was some kind of muffled sound coming from inside. Talking maybe? It

was hard to make out with the ice in the way. She stepped closer, reaching out to glide her fingers across the chilled surface of the ice. She almost jerked her hands back instantly. The barrier was intensely cold. Had she stuck her tongue on the surface, it would have almost certainly frozen in place. Even so, she leaned in so that her ear was close to the solid ice. Yes, there were certainly sounds of...something going on inside.

"I was wondering when this would happen," said Yewin in a matter-of-fact tone. He didn't seem at all concerned that the gnomes had stopped what they were doing. "Melting all that ice would likely cause a remarkable increase in, not only melted water, but also humidity. And the pressure is probably rising too, since the entrance is completely blocked off."

"Pressure?" Skellig asked, raising an eyebrow at Yewin.

"Yes, well you see when something like air heats up, it expands. I've seen this demonstrated with bags of hot air. From an alchemist who visited our village. The hotter they get, the more full they look. But trap that expansion, and it increases the pressure. Add humidity to the mix, and too much of it could become unpleasant."

"You mean, if we maintained the barrier..." said Skellig.

"They would not be able to try again until the air cooled. Though if the seal is truly air-tight, I imagine they would suffocate first."

For a moment, Jak turned away from the ice to look at both Skellig and Yewin. The suggestion was there, if not blatant. One solution to the problem of the Fae would be to just let them die from lack of air. But to their credit, no one suggested this. But Skellig thought it, that much Jak could tell from the uncomfortable stare they exchanged.

No, suffocation was not an option. Jak's friends were in there, Amelia, Perchel, Girwirt, and she couldn't let them die just to rid themselves of Vander and the problems he brought with him. Though whatever was going on inside seemed more heated than a simple conversation. Was there some kind of internal dispute happening? Maybe the others were finally refusing to follow Vander.

But there was another sound she could barely make out as well. This one didn't sound like any human or Fae she could think of, a low hissing sounds, much like...

Jak pushed herself away from the barrier just as the edge of a glowing disk cut partially through it, leaving a thin and perfectly flat line through the ice.

"The portals are back," she called as another appeared partially embedded in the stone above their heads. Jak shielded her head with both arms as bits of debris rained down on her.

"Everyone retreat away from the caves," Skellig called. She didn't have to say it twice. They all moved back a short distance. But this

time it appeared that the portals were not appearing in the camp itself. Not like the first time they had witnessed the phenomenon. This one was more centrally located within the mountain itself, and possibly within the caves.

They each continued to take a few steps back, but no one ran. Another portal appeared just in front of the cave entrance. This one remained for longer than most. And through it fell a dark shape, collapsing on the rocky ground beneath just as the portal closed.

The shape rose onto its arms and legs, and a pair of beady eyes turned to face them. It bared a row of sharp teeth.

A demon.

Each of them reacted instinctively. Skellig lit fire in her palms. Yewin dipped into a defensive stance and began to glow brighter. Rael, the troll took two steps forward from where he had been watching in the back.

But Bretton reacted first. With a pushing motion of his hands, he sent a jet of cold air at the demon. The wave of frost energy rammed into the demon, and it hurtled backward just as another portal opened in the space it had just occupied.

Bretton's magic now rammed into the newly formed portal. And it held.

The most Jak had seen these portals remain open was for two or three seconds. Never longer. But as Bretton's magic connected with the shimmering disk, it remained in place. Bretton blinked and resumed a normal stance, his arms dropping, his magic extinguished.

More demons suddenly began pouring out of the portal. First one, then another. Soon there were four demons facing them. But, mere seconds after Bretton had stopped using his magic, the portal collapsed in on itself.

Bretton had somehow managed to hold the portal open for a time. Could his magic not only have a dominion over the cold, but also grant him the ability to freeze something as mystical as a portal?

Jak didn't have much time to think. The other four demons advanced on them. But they were up against staggering odds. Between Bretton's frost, and Skellig's fire, the demons were dead before any of the others could have even approached the monsters.

When it was all over, Jak turned to Bretton. "Did you know you could hold open a portal like that?"

"I had no idea," said Bretton, looking down at his hands as though realizing that there was more to his power than his instincts had told him.

"There may be demons inside the caves," said Yewin, still tense.

Skellig waved a hand. "If there are, the Shadow Elves will make short work of them."



“Eventually, but most of the others would not have a clear defense against demons while they’re cramped inside.”

Jak looked back at the icy barrier that kept the Fae inside the caves. “Yewin’s right. We need to help.”

“But the Ice Fae just put all that work into closing up the entrance. We can’t expect everyone inside to just assume we’re there to help. Vander will think we’re taking advantage of the chaos.”

A muffled shouting came from inside the cave.

“They’re under any threat,” said Jak. “There isn’t much time.”

“Help them,” said a voice from between them. A form materialized out of thin air, a Shadow Elf. It was Viona, one of the Shadow Elves that had escaped on this side of the rocks. Everyone around her tensed and Skellig reactivated the flames in her hands. But they did not move. The elf looked at them all before settling her eyes on Jak. “Help them, and I will convince Vander to hear your challenge.”

Jak gave her the slightest nod before turning to Rael. “Can you get us in?”

Rael did not give a reply, other than taking several large strides to the ice barrier and hammering at it with one rocky fist. A large crack appeared across the surface. With a second fist against the ice, the barrier shattered entirely.

Jak could clearly hear the chaos they had only heard as muffled cries before. There were screams inside, and a handful of gnomes immediately began running out of the caves the moment they realized what had happened, brushing off shards of ice as they went.

Jak waved Bretton, Yewin, and Skellig forward. Together, they entered the caves.

With the open entrance, and Yewin created a little more light to see by, they spotted no less than three demons, spread throughout the caves. One was kicking and thrashing as it fought uselessly against a pair of Shadow Elves, two knives already embedded in its chest.

The other two were across the caverns, swinging their clawed arms at a defenseless group of gnomes and dwarves. She scanned the mass of screaming Fae around the demons, Jak thought she saw Girwirt among them. They covered their heads, but a few were trying to scramble away, aware that the cave entrance was open and they could escape. But there was no way that she and the others could get to those demons without wasting valuable time. Time that would result in unnecessary deaths.

“Skellig, can your flames reach that far? What about you, Bretton?” she asked.

“We’ll have to see,” said Skellig, lighting the fire in her palms.

Together, Skellig and Bretton focused twin blasts of elemental energy at the demons. Skellig’s fire caught one, while Bretton’s frost

froze the second in place. Gnomes and dwarves scrambled out of the way, some of them barely catching the edge of Skellig and Bretton's magic, though not enough to threaten their lives.

Some of the chaos and screams continued for a while before everyone finally figured out what had happened. Then all eyes rested on Jak, Bretton, and Skellig, their forms silhouetted against the light of the cave entrance.

"Damn you!" came an angry shout from the left side of the cave. It was Vander, and he was pulling one blade out of the chest of the third demon, now dead. It wasn't the only dead body on the ground. "I will kill you for this."

Vander began to push through the crowd, which gave way

rather fluidly. Everyone was eager to get away from him in this state.

“Hold, Vander,” said a voice behind Jak. She turned to see Viona entering through the cave mouth. “They were trying to help.”

Vander continued pushing forward, but he did slow enough to regard Viona. “Then they shouldn’t have locked us in.”

Viona began making her way towards Vander, passing up Jak and the others. “They didn’t know this would happen,” she said in a softer voice. And once she reached Vander she whispered something in his ear that Jak couldn’t hear.

Vander stopped finally, and glanced at Jak, then back at Viona. A smile split his face. “Really?” he said to Viona.

Jak swallowed. She assumed Viona was telling him about the challenge she had overheard Jak propose.

Sure enough, Vander locked eyes with her again and grinned. “You really want to solve this with single combat? A bit of an archaic method, don’t you think?”

“Archaic methods for archaic behaviors,” Jak shot back.

That wiped the smile off of Vander’s face. He snarled but composed himself, a look of steel in his eyes. “Very well. I never wanted to fight you, Jak. You were all but one of us once. Now you are a shell of your former self, committed to these high-minded ideals that will get us all killed. If sacrificing you means saving the Fae, I will do it gladly.”

“I always considered you a friend, Vander,” said Jak. “We don’t have to do this. If we could work together we could protect against all the problems we’re facing.”

“Yes, but what would we do when the food has run out?” said Vander. “You can’t possibly feed everyone. We’ll make enough mushrooms to provide for ourselves for the time being, but if we shared with you, we wouldn’t have enough for either.”

“That’s not true, there are ways to collaborate...”

Vander gave an irritated wave of his hand. “You’re wasting your

time, Jak, and mine. Name the terms of our fight.”

Jak pursed her lips. Perhaps Vander could see the truth of what she was saying, but he was showing no signs of budging from his position. Either he was too blind to see the problems with his stance, or he was too prideful to admit them. In both cases, he left Jak with only the one option.

“If I win, we agree on a peace, and myself and Skellig will coordinate everything, including who will get to stay in the caves, and who will not, as well as growing mushrooms for everyone.”

Vander sneered. “I wonder how many will follow you. I certainly can’t speak for everyone.”

Jak glanced at the others of the Fae who were watching the exchange with tense interest. She specifically sought out the leaders. Girwirt, Noralim, Perchel. Her eyes landed finally on Viona. The woman gave her the slightest nod. Yes, Jak didn’t have to worry about how they would react. If Viona was with her, the rest of the Shadow Elves would likely follow, as would the remainder of the Fae. Besides, after the fight was over, she could reveal their plans to create additional shelters of ice, thanks to the Ice Fae. That would likely alleviate some of their concerns.

“Very well,” Vander continued. “And if I win?” His expression made it clear he thought this was the more likely outcome. He folded his arms and waited for Jak’s response.

“Then we leave. We’ll continue traveling until we either find shelter or die in the attempt.”

“And I suppose you’ll take all the provisions with you.”

“Some,” Jak confirmed. “But we’ll leave enough with you to be getting on with until you can grow enough mushrooms to sustain yourselves.”

“Weapons?”

“Spears only,” she said. Shadow Elves usually used knives, but Jak knew she wouldn’t last long against him if he got that close. A spear would at least give her a chance to keep him at bay.

Vander glanced at both Jak, and Skellig. Jak could guess what was going on in his head. He was weighing the possibilities that they were deceiving him.

“We will honor our word,” she added. “And if we don’t, we’ll only be right back where we started. Nothing will have changed.” Except she would likely be dead in that situation. Hopefully she could keep it from coming to that. Perhaps Vander would be merciful enough to let her live.

“I...” Vander said in a slow, calculating voice. “...agree. We will meet tomorrow when the sun is highest. Outside. I suggest you clear a space.”

That was all Jak needed to hear. With a brief signal to Skellig, Bretton, and Yewin, she turned on her heel and strode out of the caves.

Let the Fae think on that for a bit. Skellig and Bretton had killed those two demons, saving many of them from dying, and now their leader was going to fight Jak, the person who had brought them this far. That wouldn't sit well with many of them, and she could only hope that they would think twice about Vander's questionable decisions.

Now she just had to worry about staying alive to see how they would react.



"TRY THIS ON," said Skellig a few hours later, handing Jak a piece of dark cloth. "Put it over your eyes."

They were in the small clearing outside of the camp, one that Flamedancers had cleared of snow, leaving only a dull-gray patch of rock in its place. Skellig had agreed to spar with Jak in preparation for her fight the next day.

"What for?" asked Jak, gingerly accepting the cloth.

"Shadow Fae can make themselves invisible. It is their greatest advantage. So you have to assume you will be unable to see your opponent."

That made sense, though with a blindfold on, she wouldn't be able to see anything, not even her surroundings. How could she fight like that?

Regardless, she placed the fabric over her eyes and tied it behind her head, then hefted her spear in hand.

Before she had a chance to get in a defensive stance, Skellig's staff lashed into her gut. Jak doubled over and clutched at the area. That was going to leave a bruise.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"With someone like Vander you have to expect him to attack at any moment." Skellig replied. Her voice indicated she was off to Jak's right. She spun to face the sound.

A large crack split the air as the shaft of Skellig's practice spear rammed into Jak from behind. She nearly stumbled. How had Skellig gotten behind her so fast.

"Don't listen to my voice," said Skellig, circling. "Vander may try to deceive you by speaking. Listen for the movements of his feet, and the motion of his weapon through the air."

Skellig's voice was to one side of her now. But just as Jak was

about to turn and brandish her staff in the direction of the voice, she heard a high-pitched rushing sound coming at her from behind again. She performed a full stance reversal that simultaneously moved her away from the sound, and brought her staff around to intercept it. Their staffs met with a force that vibrated up Jak's arms.

"Good, now the only way you will have a chance at defeating Vander is if you strike early and strike hard. If not, he will wear you down and eventually break through your defenses. A defense, in this case, will only get you killed in the long run."

"Any suggestions?" Jak asked. "If I can't see him."

"Shadow Elves cannot do too many things at once. It's likely that if he attacks you, he will become visible for a short period of time. If you are ready for him when he does attack, you can catch him off guard and get in a good blow before he can disappear again."

Jak was about to respond, when she heard the slight crease of Skellig's armor as the major lunged for another attack. Jak sidestepped this time, anticipating the direction of the blow, and bringing her own spear down. She didn't hit anything, but she also didn't get hurt. That was something at least.

A sharp blow to one knee caused her to buckle and fall. Shortly thereafter she felt the butt of Skellig's practice spear on Jak's neck. "Vander will attack ferociously. Don't expect him to back down after just one attack."

"But you said I would be able to see him."

"I said it's possible. We have to practice under the assumption that you won't. That's the only way to build an advantage."

Jak got to her feet. "I understand. Let's go again."

They spent the rest of that evening, and a good portion of the

following morning practicing. Though Skellig insisted on not pushing her too much, especially in the morning. Her excuse was that it would wear Jak out before the actual fight.

Well, she was probably right. But that didn't stop Jak from wanting to continue even after Skellig called a halt. Skellig still managed to break through Jak's defenses all too often. Only once, literally once, had Jak managed to hit Skellig while wearing the blindfold. And despite Skellig's congratulations and assurances that doing so was a very difficult task, she couldn't help but realize that she had to have that same combination of luck and skill at the very beginning of the fight, or Vander would tear her to pieces.

She didn't see much of the others while she practiced. Seph showed up once in the morning, but disappeared shortly thereafter once Skellig bested Jak three times out of three. He was probably just worried for her. She would have to talk to him before the fight. Try to reassure him that she was doing what's best, and that the others, humans and Fae, would be okay even if she died.

A glance up at the sun, and Skellig insisted that they quit for the day and that Jak get something to eat. They walked to the place where a quartermaster was serving soup for the day. It was heavily watered down.

Skellig allowed Jak a second ration, just in preparation for the fight. She didn't complain, even though it would take away from someone, somewhere. But she needed every advantage she could get. And if she lost...well then they wouldn't have to worry about her using up the rations ever again.

Taking the soup with her, she retreated back to the makeshift shelter of her tent, looking for Seph. Seph wasn't there so she continued on, her head swiveling from side to side in between large spoonfuls of soup.

She finally found Seph back at the small clearing where Jak had been training, and where the battle would eventually take place. He

was standing with his arms folded, looking out across the clearing, and to the snowy landscape beyond.

"I'm sorry to put you through this," she said as she approached him from behind.

He didn't act surprised, just turned his head to look at her. A ghost of his dazzling smile touched his lips, but it quickly faded. "I understand the need. I just wish it could be someone else."

"I thought you had faith in me?" she said, coming closer and squeezing him with one arm while keeping the soup in her other hand.

"I do, and for once, that's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..." he broke off. "I don't know what I mean. I feel like...like for the first time I'm conflicted. I do believe in you, and I believe you have a destiny beyond what you've already accomplished. But..."

"But you're still scared." Jak concluded for him.

"Yeah, I guess so. You may be surprised to learn that very little has scared me in the past. Even when Cain was fighting you on top of Mt. Knot. By comparison, this isn't as bad as that, not even for you."

"Are you scared now because I don't have my brands?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's that we've come to fighting amongst ourselves. I never thought such a thing would happen. Illadar was supposed to be a place of peace. And now with Vander...and you getting caught up in it..."

She set down the bowl of soup and put both arms around him. He responded by embracing her in a tight hug, one that almost seemed to meld them together. Then she leaned up and kissed him.

"Marry me, Seph." She said the words almost before she realized what they were. Seph looked at her, agape.

"Ah, what?" he stammered.

Jak almost took the words back. Marry him? She was probably about to die, fighting against an incredibly gifted opponent with nothing but a wooden stick. She couldn't get married now. She couldn't do that to Seph, could she?

But the words had felt right, and they were right. She loved Seph. Sure, he wasn't exactly the most aggressive man, or the most talented. But he was good. And he had never once done anything to hurt her, or to discourage her from being anything but her best.

"Yes," she said. "Marry me. I know I may or may not make it out of this alive. But if I do, there's no one I want to be with more than you."

Seph gazed at her for a long time. Long enough that she began to wonder if he was okay and she hadn't gone too far.



But then he kissed her. Their lips met with a hard passion. She felt tingles run up and down her spine as Seph held her closer to his body, holding the kiss long enough that her breath began to come faster and faster.

His hands moved lower, his mouth all but attacking hers with furious heat. She reciprocated his response, grabbing his hair and pulling his face down harder.

When he finally let her go, every limb of her body was quivering with excitement. That had been, by far, the best kiss he had ever given her.

“If that didn’t make it clear,” he said, that familiar grin spreading across his face. “That was a yes.”



“SKELLIG!” Jak called as she ran back to where she had last seen the major by the quartermaster. Seph trailed behind her, his hand firmly enclosed in hers as she pulled him along. Skellig was still there, helping with the distribution of rations to a long line of people. At Jak’s hurried gait, she quickly stopped what she was doing and stepped away to talk to Jak.

“What is it?” she asked. “More portals?”

“No,” said Jak. “I need you to marry us.” She pulled Seph to her by the arm for emphasis.

Skellig glanced at Seph, then at Jak, then back at Seph, then back at Jak again. “Are you serious? You’re about to...”

“Yes, I know what I’m about to do, and yes, we’re serious.”

Seph ran his free hand through his hair. “As a religious leader I’d perform it myself except since I’m the one getting married...”

“You two really want to get married?” said Skellig, still stuck on the idea.

“Did I not make that clear?” said Jak.

Skellig stared at them for a moment longer, before a rare smile spread over her face. She laughed. “Jak, leave it to you to take me by surprise even after everything you’ve done. I would be happy to marry the two of you.”

“Thank you, Skellig!” Jak felt like she was a young girl again, like the day when she had finally received her first brand. Excitement bubbled up inside of her.

“Mind you, I haven’t actually officiated in a wedding before. Our circumstances are somewhat unusual. But I suppose if we could get a pair of witnesses and some kind of written record, then it doesn’t matter who performs the ceremony.”

Seph spoke up, "I'm sure Yewin and one of the Triad like Li, Bretton, or Mosaial would be happy to witness. But as to a written record, aren't we short on paper?"

"We are," said Skellig. "But perhaps we could find a flat rock, or some leather that we could..."

"I just had an idea," said Jak. Without pausing to explain what she was thinking, she let go of Seph's hand, and dashed back to her tent area. It took her some moments to get there, and a few more to find what she needed. Near the small shelter was a pile of belongings, including one pack that held all of Jak's clothing and other items. She opened the drawstrings and fished inside for what she needed.

Down at the bottom she finally found it. Her journal. It was old and weathered now, and she hadn't used it in a long time, not since she had lost all her brands. But it still remained one of her most prized possessions, the result of all her research since she learned to read and write. And there were still several blank pages in the back.

It was perfect.

She backtracked to find Seph still standing where she had left him. "Skellig went off to find Yewin and another witness," he said as she approached. "She said we should head to the edge of the camp, where we just were."

Jak smiled, "Where I'm going to fight Vander later?" she asked.

"Ah yeah, that's the one."

For some reason, that didn't bother her. After all, it was as good of a place as any. And they wouldn't have to worry about people crowding around them.

Jak glanced at the sky as they hurried to the chosen spot. It was almost mid-day. Vander would be emerging from the caves soon. As much as she would have loved to savor the moment, they had to get this done. She would not wait until after the fight to get married. She needed this now. Needed to make that connection to Seph, even if they did not have the time nor privacy to connect on that level physically, at least she could know that he would be there after the fight with Vander. And if anything, that was exactly the motivation she needed.

No, she would not abandon him now. He needed her, and she needed him. She wasn't about to give that up.

Skellig appeared shortly, accompanied by Yewin and Li. Li still didn't look very good. Her face was a pale, almost green color, but her face smiled as she saw Jak and Seph.

"I am so happy for you," she said, her eastern accent more pronounced in her excitement.

Jak smiled back. She didn't know Li very well, but they shared a special connection ever since Jak had gone back in time and met the

woman years earlier. Jak grinned inwardly as she remembered how the captain had mistrusted her back then. How things had changed.

Yewin was also smiling at the both of them. "You have an odd sense of timing." His light washed over them. "But I'm happy for you. I only wish we could enjoy this moment under better circumstances."

Seph squeezed Jak just a little harder. "I think that just means we'd better get on with it. Skellig?"

Startled, Skellig started forward. "Of course. Did you have something where we can all sign to make it legally binding? Or at least as legal as we can manage in a time like this."

Jak reached out her hand holding the journal. "We can use the last page in this."

Skellig accepted the journal and the charcoal pencil that Jak offered next, after pulling it from her pouch. "I suppose this is as good as anything." She scratched a few words into the paper, and gave it back to Jak for approval. She read what Skellig had written.

*This paper certifies that Jakniteksnewodheghoma and Seph of the eastern nations, are hereby joined together in wedlock, effective today, the eighteenth of Vel, in the year four-thousand, nine-hundred and seventy-nine after the years of our ancestors.*

There was a space for Jak and Seph to sign their names, as well as a space for Skellig and the two witnesses.

Jak nodded, "I think it's perfect."

"Well then," said Skellig, spreading her feet apart and adopting a more rigid posture. "Do you have anything you wish to say to each other?"

Jak blinked. She hadn't thought about saying something. Everything was happening so fast that she'd just assumed Skellig would marry them and that would be it. But to her surprise, Seph spoke up immediately, "I do."

He broke their embrace to face her head on. She looked up into his gray eyes, those deep wells of goodness.

"Jak," he began. "I would like to thank you for having the courage to ask this of me. I know I haven't always been the most aggressive with my own desires. I've always kind of assumed that I was a vessel to facilitate change, for the greater good, but at a sacrifice of my own wants. Today, you proved that didn't have to be the case."

Jak smiled. It was true she would like it if he were a bit more aggressive in their relationship, and not just in moving it forward. But there was something truly good in the way he respected her as well, in the way he only did what she wanted of him. And that was enough for her.

He paused for a moment, and Jak let him have a moment to think before continuing. "The truth is, I've wanted to be yours since the

moment I saw you in the library at the College of Skyecliff, asleep after reading your book. Ever since then I knew you would be special. Not just for Illadar and the Fae, but for me. And you have been, Jak. You are the greatest person to ever enter into my life. And I love you more than I can possibly express in words."

Her hands were in his, otherwise she could have wiped away the small tear that crept out of the corner of her eye. Why did he have to be so sweet?

"And if we make it through this, and you survive your fight with Vander, I promise to remain true to you for the rest of eternity. Not just in this life, but in the life to come. You won't be able to get rid of me."

He grinned and she let out a soft laugh through her tears.

"I guess all I'm saying, Jak. Is that I love you, and there's nothing more that I want now than to marry you. And for once, I'm getting what I want, and I could not be happier."

He smiled as he ended his statement, and now looked to her expectantly. To her surprise, the words simply came to her. "I love you, Seph. I don't think I truly understood what love was until you came into my life. I can see now what my father and mother must have felt, and understand how painful it must have been for them to part, even though it was necessary. I promise that I will never leave you. Not ever." She emphasized that last part. She wasn't just talking about loyalty, she was talking about her fight with Vander. She was not going to die and leave Seph without his wife.

She didn't have as much to say as Seph, but it seemed right. They both turned to Skellig, waiting.

Skellig cleared her throat. "Well then, as a former major among the Watchers, and as military leader of this expedition, I declare you to be married. Let the witnesses observe this act today to be legally binding, to be kept in the records of...of Illadar, and to declare the love of these two people for all to know."

Both Yewin and Li nodded, their smiles radiating off of their faces.

Before Skellig could give them any kind of go-ahead, Jak turned back to Seph, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and pulled him in for their first kiss as husband and wife.

She hadn't thought such a kiss would feel any different, but for some reason it did. Seph kissed back with a fervor that sent tingles down her spine. She wanted nothing more than to pull him closer and closer.

After a few seconds, they broke the kiss. Jak smiled at him. They were married! "What would mother or father say if they could see me now?" she said aloud.

"I think they do." Seph gave her a comforting smile. "The dead are

closer to us than we realize.”

“One of your mysterious prophetic insights?” she asked.

He shrugged. “No. Just a feeling.” He stared off into the distance for a moment before his eyes came back to her. “Today, the only thing I know for sure is that I love you.”

She smiled and leaned in for another kiss before resting her head on his chest and letting her arms wrap around him as tightly as his did around her.

“It’s almost time,” she said, noting the sun’s position high in the sky.

“I know,” he replied, not breaking the embrace.

“I’m not going to let him kill me.”

This time he did break the embrace to stare into her eyes. “You’d better not.” A slight grin graced his face. She mirrored the grin back at him.

Word traveled fast that Jak was fighting Vander at mid-day,

and her hasty marriage to Seph had already attracted onlookers. Soon, an enormous crowd surrounded the patch of ground outside the camp that had been cleared of snow for the fight. Skellig did what she could to keep people from crowding Jak, who spent the next few minutes perched on a rock, staring at the ground and letting her mind go blank. It was not an easy task.

She had to remain focused. Now that she was joined with Seph, she had a far greater motivation than she had ever experienced in her life, even more than the times when she had used her brands and the Pillars of Eternity to create Illadar, or defend the Fae from the queen. This was something different. It was primal, born out of a place of pure charity for someone she loved. It was beyond what she thought possible to feel for another human being.

But motivation wouldn't help much if she couldn't remember her training. Mentally she ran through everything she had learned over the years, first from Naem in her early days after leaving Riverbrook. What would Naem think if he was here now? Would he have accepted her choice to marry Seph? He had confessed that he still harboured feelings for her, shortly before leaving to recruit people from Skyecliff. But that seemed like a lifetime ago, and she was already in love with Seph by that point, though she hadn't been ready to admit it yet.

She shook her head to rid herself of distractions, focusing once more on her training. Her time with Skellig the day before had helped her grow more confident in fighting an opponent she couldn't see. But real training took months and years of practice to get to the point where her muscles could react instinctively. She wasn't sure what she had practiced would be enough against Vander.

But it would have to be. She would just have to act fast, and rid Vander of his weapon early on so she would have the advantage. That was really the best hope she had. Either that or stab him before he could bring his weapon to bear. But the Shadow Elves were fast, and Vander was one of the oldest members of their race. He had far more

experience using his powers than almost any Fae alive.

The crowd on one side parted as the people became aware of who approached. It was Vander, accompanied by Viona and several others of the Shadow Elves. Girwirt, Perchel, and many other Fae trailed behind them as well. And in the back Jak saw several dwarves pulling a large wagon filled with water.

It was Amelia! The Fae were bringing her friend to watch. Their eyes met as Amelia's wagon rolled into view. Her skin was pale and she looked exhausted, at least mentally speaking. There were gray shadows under her eyes and her hair was a mess. The look she gave Jak did not look anything like the cheerful expressions she had come to expect from her friend.

Jak had almost forgotten how restricted the Water Fae were in those wagons. They didn't have any lakes nearby that they knew about, and besides it was too cold for any of that. So they were forced to remain in wagons at the back of the caves. What had they been doing this whole time besides sleeping and eating? There couldn't have been anything else to do.

The sight of her friend only reinforced Jak's determination. She had to win this, or more would suffer. Putting Vander in his place would be the best way to heal the wound between humans and Fae, or at least she hoped. She knew enough of the others to know they were disgruntled with Vander's leadership. Perhaps even if she lost this fight they would realize that putting their faith in the Shadow Elf was no longer in their best interest.

But she would not lose. She could not.

Vander strode ahead of the others, into the dry circle, his arms outstretched to either side. "Well, I'm here, Jak. You sure you want to throw away your life? You could just instruct everyone to leave us alone, to leave the caves, and then none of this will be necessary. Not to mention you would have your life."

Jak stood up from the rock where she had been sitting. "I would ask the same of you. All you have to do is give us all a chance to work together, instead of isolating yourself and the other Fae. We could all find a way to survive."

Vander came to a halt in the middle of the circle. "Very well then, we both know this is the only way, and neither of us are willing to back out. Then let's get this over with. I always liked you, Jak. You were your mother's daughter. And I'm truly sorry to be the one to end your life."

Jak resisted the urge to verbally spar with him, to tell him that he shouldn't be so overconfident, that she would put him in his place. But no, she wanted him to underestimate her. That would provide her with a crucial advantage at the beginning. And she needed every

advantage she could get.

Skellig strode into the circle holding two spears. Jak met her and Vander in the center of the circle, and took the spear Skellig offered.

"These are the terms," Skellig shouted for all within earshot to hear. "Should Vander win, I and all of the human population, as well as any Fae who wish to accompany us—" Vander sneered as she said this. "—will leave this place in search of a more permanent home. Should Jak win, the Fae will defer to her will, and join with us in a centralized order that will determine how best to use all of our resources to the best advantage of everyone."

Jak's eyes remained locked on Vander, though she wanted to find Seph among the crowd. She knew he was there, watching. No one would care more about the outcome of this fight than he. And broken brands but she was going to make sure his fears were never realized.

Skellig retreated backwards, and Jak fell into a defensive stance, her eyes still never leaving Vander.

"Begin," shouted Skellig.

Vander let out a slight smile before disappearing from her view completely. She had been expecting this, and tightened her grip on her spear.

A slight flow of air to her left was the only warning she got. She flung the shaft of her spear in a downward motion, whilst simultaneously rolling her body away from its previous position.

For a split second, Vander reappeared as Jak's spear collided with his own, smashing it down to the ground. There was a look of surprise on his face.

This was her moment. With a twist of her wrists, she brought the tip of her spear back up again and swung it at Vander's face with all the speed she could muster. He backed away just in time to avoid a fatal blow, but the tip of the spear carved a long gash across his dark skin.

Vander yelled in pain and anger before disappearing once again. Jak cursed. That had been her best opening. He would be on his guard now.

Suddenly a darkness closed about her eyes. The bright light of day faded as she went blind. She blinked but immediately knew what was happening. Vander was using another of his Fae abilities to create darkness around her. Not only could she not see, but onlookers wouldn't be able to see what was going on around her either.

She took a deep breath. This was just like the blindfold Skellig had given her earlier. She just had to remain calm.

A slight whistle through the air indicated Vander's spear coming towards her again. Vander was swinging it too much rather than using it to puncture. He wasn't experienced with the spear, and right now



that was her only advantage.

Her spear connected with his, but his blow was strong enough that it almost ripped the spear out of her hands. She gripped it tighter, but in the process lost her footing. A follow-up swipe with the butt of Vander's spear connected with the small of her back and she fell entirely.

She scrambled out of the way just as she heard the clink of metal against stone as Vander's spear tip stabbed right in the space she had just occupied. On a hunch, she threw herself backward, rolling right into the opposing spear.

Sure enough, Vander wasn't expecting that move. Jak's roll sent the end of the spear flying out of the Shadow Elf's hands.

Mustering all her strength, such as it was, she rolled out of the way and quickly got her feet underneath her. She held Vander's spear in her opposite hand. Then she brought it down on one knee and heard the satisfying crack as it broke. Before Vander could attack further, she flung the broken weapon away from her, far enough that it would likely land in the crowd.

Jak braced herself, still sightless. The move had lasted mere seconds, yet Vander's surprised and frustrated yell was enough to tell her that she'd just scored a significant blow. She'd rid him of his weapon.

A chorus of cheers erupted around her, though Jak still couldn't see any of the onlookers. She couldn't grow too confident now. Vander still had his eyesight, and that was more than Jak could say for herself. He could still easily kill her without a weapon under these circumstances.

Vander grew silent, and Jak waited for a brush of air, anything to indicate which direction he would strike from next. But she felt nothing.

"He's disappeared, Jak." Skellig shouted at her.

So he was turning invisible *and* clouding her vision. That meant that he didn't want the crowd to know where he was. She swallowed a lump that suddenly appeared in her throat.

He wasn't coming for her with any big attacks, this time. He was coming for her like an assassin would, slowly, carefully, and without warning.

Jak stilled herself, and she wasn't the only one. A hush sounded across the crowds, so silent Jak could hear the wind whistling above them. She breathed in then let it all out in a constant, steady stream. She had to remain calm, or...

Two hands closed around her neck from behind. Jak gasped and tried to breathe in, but her airway was completely blocked.

Vander was choking her.

Time slowed as she brought her spear to bear. She grabbed it by the front of the shaft, with the pointed end below her palm. Then she swung it backward. Perhaps the tip could reach his leg or side and cause him to release her. Sparks flew in front of her eyes as he tightened his grip and dodged out of the way of her spear.

She changed tactics, feeling herself grow dizzy as she did so. This time she brought the end of her spear up to her neck. It was risky to have it that close to her face, but if she could stab over her shoulder...

The strong force of Vander's hands wrenched her to one side. She would have cried out had his hands not been blocking her airpipe. Her spear fell out of her hands and she was flung to the ground, face first. She felt the force of Vander pinning her to the ground from above. His hands had never left her throat.

Jak reached forward, searching for anything that could help her. Her hands found a rock, which she flung backward as hard as she could.

A satisfying grunt from Vander indicated she had met her mark, and the grip on her throat loosened. She clutched at the hands and managed to pry his index finger away. Then without hesitating, she bit down on it as hard as she could.

Vander's screams flew across the small clearing and Jak tasted the metallic blood that gushed from his hand, and nearly gagged as the tip of the finger came off completely so that she had to spit it out.

The pressure on her back loosened and she squirmed to get out from under him. Heaving to one side, she threw Vander off balance, and caught a glimpse of him cradling his hand, now missing the tip of his index finger.

She hadn't meant to bite that hard, but it had given her the time she needed. She scrambled to her feet and her eyes swept the clearing to find her spear. Just as her eyes found the weapon, she hit the ground hard as her leg was pulled back and out from under her.

Vander had regained his feet. He glared at her, hatred burning in the green flames of his eyes. "Witch!" he said, before lunging at her.

Jak tried to roll over and get her feet between them so she could push him away, but just as she prepared to hold him off, he pulled a small knife out of his sleeve and dug it into her thigh.

Jak screamed. It was the first real blow he had inflicted on her, and pain tore into her in waves. He wasn't supposed to bring a knife.

Jak breathed. It wasn't a deep wound. She could survive it if...

Vander abandoned the knife, launching himself forward so that he pressed Jak to the ground, one knee on her torso, pinning her in place.

The pressure made it difficult once again to breathe. And while Vander had all but forgotten the knife he had used to stab her leg, it still lay embedded in her thigh where he had left it. What was he

waiting for? All he had to do was take it and end this.

“Oh no, I’m not going to kill you,” he said, grinning as if knowing he had guessed her thoughts. “You’ve caused me too much pain for me to end your life and give you release.”

His fist, the one without the missing fingertip, flew down at her face. Jak called out as a burning heat spread on her face where he had hit her. Then before she could react, the fist came down again, this time on the other side of her face. He hit so hard that sparks began to swim in front of her eyes, and the world swam around her.

“You will pay for what you’ve done to me,” Vander said, with another strike that left her reeling. “You will—” he hit her again, “—become—” and again, “—an example—” another strike, “—for all to see!”

Jak felt her vision blur. She glanced to either side to see if there was anything she could do. But her eyes were beginning to swell shut, and the fallen weapons were likely too far away. This was it. This was her end. Though her vision blurred, she could see the faces of the onlookers, all of which were clutching at their mouths, or gazing on with expressions of horror on their faces.

She choked as blood trickled down her throat from the many cuts inflicted by Vander’s beating. But even as he beat her senseless, she had a moment of clarity, a moment of hope. In between blows, she caught the horrified faces of humans and Fae alike, as Vander beat their former leader, their previous beacon of hope.

Despite herself, she couldn’t help but choke out a laugh.

Vander stopped beating her.

“What?” he sounded almost afraid. And who could blame him when the person he was beating began to laugh. With that one simple action, she had undermined his dominance of her.

“You don’t get it, do you?” she croaked. It hurt to talk. Her face and tongue were swollen, and her eyes were closing up with the beating her face had taken. But she forced herself to speak. “These people will never follow you again. You’ve just proven to them that you’re unworthy of leading them.”

Vander raised his glowing green eyes to stare around him, tensing as if only now aware that everyone was watching. No one met his eyes, not even the others of the Shadow Fae.

“I’m sorry for you, Vander. You were one of the first Fae, and now you’ve thrown away everything that stands for. You’ve abandoned your gifts.”

“You shut your mouth!” he hit her again, and this time Jak’s vision darkened. She was about to pass out. “The Fae are everything you are not. We are the next stage of humanity, a superior version, we are gods compared to you.”

“And yet,” Jak managed to say, summoning the last of her strength. “This pathetic, helpless human, has just undermined everything you claim to value.”

Once again, Vander scanned the crowd. And once again, everyone averted their eyes. He knew she was right. Jak smiled. She had lost this fight, but if it meant dying as a martyr, and teaching a lesson to the Fae so that something like this would never happen again, well perhaps that was worth it. She could die, knowing her memory would live on as both inspiration and a reminder of what could happen if the Fae lost their way.

But no, that was not how this was supposed to end. Seph was out there, counting on her. She had to live for Seph. She could become a martyr and it would inspire people for a time, but then what? And what more could she do if she weren’t alive to do it?

*You are not done yet,* Gabriel's words came to her. This time they truly resonated. No, this was not the time for her to die.

With a scream, Vander raised both fists high into the air, getting ready to bring them crashing down onto her head. Jak acted quickly. In an instant, she grabbed the knife sticking out of her leg and pulled, hard. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as pain lanced through her, but she maintained just enough lucidity for what came next. She rammed the small knife into Vander's side.

He let out a cry, but Jak did not give him enough time to react. She plunged the knife into him again, and again.

His fists came down on her head once more, and this time, she faltered. The knife slipped from her fingers as the shadows closed in. Vander grabbed a nearby rock and raised it above his head. Jak closed her eyes.

But the blow never came. Instead, she felt the pressure of Vander's form on top of her release, just as the Shadow Elf screamed in what was sheer, utter agony. A wave of heat cut through the freezing air. Was Skellig or another Flamedancer attacking? They couldn't do that! It would ruin the point Jak had just tried to make. If humans killed Vander, none of the Fae would ever trust them again, even if they acknowledged Vander's error.

Jak opened her eyes as best she could, given her swollen face. Even that small action took an extreme level of effort. But she could still see.

Vander was thrashing his arms through the air just above her, his entire body alight, the bright warmth of the fire at odds with the dark shadows that emanated from the Shadow Elf. He was screaming but the flames would not relent.

Jak tried to turn her head to locate the source of the flames, but there didn't seem to be one. Vander was simply on fire, from his head to his boots, almost as though he were burning from the inside. And try as she might, Jak could not identify a direction that the flames had come from.

Vander's screams did not last long. Soon after they began, he collapsed to the cold, hard ground, while the fire continued to consume his flesh. Jak gathered what strength she had left to raise her head and see the Shadow Elf's corpse more clearly. And that was when she finally realized what had happened.

Girwirt was standing next to the burning corpse, his hands still latched onto what had been Vander's leg. Tears were streaming down his eyes. "He was going to kill you," he cried, as his eyes met hers.

Oh Girwirt. It had been the little gnome who had killed Vander. He must have come forward during the battle, grabbed hold of Vander, and worked his Fae magic. When that magic could melt rock, Vander

would have had no chance.

No one said a word. No one rushed forward to attack Girwirt, or to help Jak. You could have heard a pin drop, even though hundreds of people were watching. It was a somber moment. For the first time, a Fae had killed another Fae. The weight of that was beginning to sink in.

And yet, as Jak surveyed the faces of the remaining Shadow Elves, or other Fae within the clearing, she saw their eyes fall. They were ashamed. And clearly, not one of them blamed Girwirt or Jak for anything. This time it hadn't been Cain who had oppressed them, nor the queen, nor any form of demons. It had been one of their own. That was not a burden they were likely to forget any time soon. But it was a lesson they would all learn.

Jak let her head fall back down to the rock, finally allowing the darkness to take her.

It took several days for Jak to get to the point where she could move about again. Li saw to her healing, making sure she had plenty of warm fluids, a poultice for the knife wound in her thigh, and ice to help curb the swelling on Jak's face.

Besides the gash in her thigh, and the beating of her face, she hadn't suffered much worse. Li informed her that she probably had a fractured rib, which would explain why it hurt to breathe. But apparently that wouldn't cause any lasting problems as long as she got plenty of rest.

And she did get rest. Viona quickly informed her, following the battle, that she had been selected as the new leader of the Shadow Elves, and that Jak was welcome to rest in the caves. Jak took her up on the offer, but only for the first two days. After that, she insisted, despite Li and Skellig's protests, that she be moved outside to allow someone else to take her spot in the shelter.

Besides, the outside was where all the excitement was happening anyway. On Jak's suggestion, the Ice Fae were beginning to build a dome of ice that would eventually extend for more than a mile away from the caves, possibly further, giving them plenty of room to live.

Most of the space in the caves was now being used by the gnomes and dwarves to plant and harvest as many mushroom as possible. Skellig had slowed the rations down to a quarter of what they once were, and they still did not have enough resulting in more people falling sick. But they had extended the date that they would run out of food by several weeks. And if they could grow enough mushrooms, they might be able to hold that off indefinitely though it would be a long while before they ever had more than the bare minimum to eat.

Jak met with each of the council members, including every Fae representative daily now, usually from where she and Seph slept. Her new husband had been the greatest source of joy in the days following her battle with Vander. He had never once complained about waiting on her every need. It provided her with more motivation than ever to heal and find some private time with the man. Though there was little

of that to be had.

On the fourth day following the battle, she managed to spend some time walking around the ice walls that the Ice Fae were forming. They already towered above her head some twenty feet. The Fae were building it in an arc, so that it would eventually connect with a similar wall several hundred yards away. Some of the gnomes and dwarves were helping to construct large piles of rock that would help to support the ice dome, though Bretton assured them that the ice would remain extremely solid once they bridged the two walls.

It was a marvel of engineering, and one that Jak couldn't help but stare at in awe.

"It's something, isn't it?" said Skellig. The woman approached Jak from the direction of her tent, which was now almost completely covered by the arching ice barrier. Jak was pleased to see that the woman looked far less pale, and even bore a soft smile on her face.

"It is," said Jak. "Any word on when it will be finished?"

"Bretton says it will be completed in two to three weeks. We've survived for longer, so we can probably stay alive long enough for that to happen. Then we'll have all the shelter we need for some time."

Jak smiled. "And if we manage to harvest more mushrooms..."

"We'll all be sick of them," Skellig grinned, "but we will be alive. And that's more than I could have hoped for a week ago."

Just then, Jak saw Noralim running towards them from behind Skellig, huffing and puffing as he moved his small but stocky body as fast as his little legs could carry him. Jak frowned as he approached. He did not look very happy.

"What is it, Noralim?" she asked. Skellig turned to look at the dwarf as he arrived.

"It's Girwirt," he said once he stopped and caught his breath. "I don't know what to do about him. He's not eating and he won't come in out of the cold."

"He's outside the walls?" Jak asked.

Noralim nodded.

"Well can't he make enough heat to keep himself warm?" asked Skellig, her eyebrows furrowing.

This time Noralim shook his head. "He hasn't used his abilities since killing Vander. He won't talk to me either, which is not like him. Oh please, young Jak, please help him. I've been trying for days but I'm afraid he'll die if he doesn't find warmth or food."

Jak locked her jaw. Whatever Girwirt was suffering, whether it was shock or guilt or something else entirely, Jak could probably relate. "Of course, I'll go talk to him." Noralim led her away from the camp, far enough that the sound of everyone working began to fade,



replaced by the gentle whistle of a cold wind. Skellig remained behind.

It didn't take long for Jak to catch sight of Girwirt. The little gnome was sitting with his back to Jak. His flaming hair that usually stuck straight up, and gleamed a furious red, now seemed dull and flat. His shoulders were slumped, and even a thin layer of snow lay on his clothing, as though the wind had dusted him and he never bothered to move or brush it off.

"Hello, Girwirt," she said as she approached.

The gnome said nothing in return. Only his head turned slightly to acknowledge her presence.

Jak made a small hand motion to Noralim to indicate he stay back and let her handle this. She took a few steps forward. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

Girwirt grunted something inaudible.

"We're concerned for you. What you did to Vander, it saved my life. You don't have to feel bad about it."

Still the gnome said nothing. So Jak knelt and put one hand on the ground so she could sit, wincing as the wound in her leg protested.

"You have to eat something and come back to the caves," she said, trying again. "You'll die out here."

"About what I deserve," said the gnome. His usual sharp, high-pitched tone was soft and forlorn.

"You saved my life, Girwirt," said Jak.

"Doesn't make it okay," he bit back at her.

Jak opened her mouth to retort, but stopped herself. No, he was right. Killing someone even to save someone else didn't make it okay. It justified the act, perhaps, but she could understand what Girwirt was going through.

"I suppose not," she said instead. "I wish I could tell you that it gets better. But I've killed people I didn't want to kill. I would have killed Vander too if it had come to that. But that would not have made killing right. Killing is never right."

A sudden sniff caused her to look sharply at the gnome. He was wiping his nose. "No one looks at me the same," he said. "They wonder who I'll kill next."

"Oh Girwirt," Jak couldn't help herself. She wrapped the small gnome in her arms and felt his cold body shake against hers. "They don't think that. No one blames you for what you did."

"Not yet, but what if things get bad again? What if there's another Vander? What if *I'm* another Vander."

Jak closed her eyes. "That won't happen, because I know you. You're not the kind of gnome to throw away reason for your own pride. Vander wanted power, and he thought himself superior to the

rest of us. You are not like that.”

“Sometimes I am,” Girwirt confessed. Jak looked at him but continued to hold him close until he spoke again. “There are times when I think of you giants as stupid, and that I hate you for what happened to us in our mountain. I agreed with Vander sometimes. I thought we should have the caves for ourselves. We were meant to live in caves anyway.”

“So what changed?” Jak prompted.

Girwirt didn’t say anything at first, but his arms eventually rose so that he was hugging Jak back. “I’m sorry for all the bad things I’ve said about you before,” he said, his voice quivering. “I think you’re a good giant.”

Jak’s heart melted. She had never held the gnome’s snide comments against him, but it was nice to know that he cared, and that it was their relationship, however strange, that had resulted in his change of attitude towards her and other humans.

“Thank you, Girwirt,” she said, hugging him tighter.

“You can’t link,” said Girwirt back to her.

Jak was caught off guard by the sudden change in the topic. “What?” “I just tried linking with you, and I couldn’t do it,” he replied.

“You...what?” She hadn’t felt a thing. “That’s dangerous, Girwirt. You know that linking with me, if we don’t have a troll around to provide the energy we need, it could kill you.”

“But you can’t do it,” he repeated.

“Well no, it’s because of the Void brand.” She raised her right hand to show it to him. “Yewin and I tried to link right after we got here, and it didn’t work then either. Void brands apparently block linking as well.”

Noralim had edged closer through the conversation and was wringing his hands. “You mustn’t try to link with a human unaided, Girwirt, it can be dangerous for us. You know that. But...” he looked like he was changing his mind about being so demanding with the gnome. “I’m glad to see you’re feeling better at least.”

A thought occurred to Jak. “Girwirt, why did you want to link?”

Girwirt shrugged. He still wasn’t back to his usual pessimistic, grumbling self, but at least his face wasn’t a mask of depression anymore. “I don’t know, honestly. Sometimes when we link, we share something that I like. Like I can feel what you’re feeling.”

“Ah yes,” said Noralim, a little more encouraged now that Girwirt was talking normally again, and relieved that Girwirt hadn’t tried to link in order to hurt himself. “That is common in links.” He said addressing Jak. “We often share one another’s...awareness, one might say. We can’t read minds, per se, but it does provide us with some

measure of comfort knowing we're part of something larger."

Jak nodded. "It's the same for me as well. I can't really put into words what it was like when I created this planet."

"Even though it's not complete," said Girwirt, offhandedly. "Where are the plants, the animals, the warm air. It's like the planet is broken."

Jak began nodding slowly. "Yes, that's true. After all, there are supposed to be more Fae, and I built this planet before we had them all, so naturally there would be a few things missing."

"Yes, but even with one more, it's not exactly helping," said Girwirt. "We're still struggling to find basic things like food."

Jak paused. "Say that again, Girwirt."

"I said we're still struggling to find food."

"No, I mean the other thing. You said we have one more. One more what?"

"One more Fae, of course." Girwirt narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you sure you're recovered from all those hits to the head?"

Jak smiled, momentarily grateful to have the old Girwirt back. But what the gnome had said quickly took precedence. They had another Fae now, the Ice Fae, a new race that hadn't been present at the formation of Illadar. They had developed after.

Jak rose to her feet, feeling pain stab through her leg and chest at the sudden movement. "Girwirt, I think you're brilliant."

She began walking as fast as her bad leg would allow, back towards the main camp. Girwirt got to his feet and began walking after her, followed closely by Noralim, who was practically skipping at seeing his friend feeling better and coming back into the camp.

Girwirt trotted to keep up with her, even though she was moving slower than usual. "Well you know I'm brilliant, and I know I'm brilliant, but what exactly are you on about this time?" he asked.

"The Ice Fae. They weren't there when we created Illadar." Jak replied. "Which means they could be a next step in the process of creation. Perhaps they could help heal the world in a way."

"How?" said the gnome. "They make things cold. That's not exactly something this world needs right now, we have plenty of that."

"I don't know," admitted Jak. "But I'll bet the two of you could figure it out." She turned to give Girwirt and Noralim a slight wink.

"How do you mean?" This time it was Noralim who spoke.

"Well, it's like you said, when you link with someone you gain insight about their abilities. I can't link, so that leaves you two and any of the other Fae who want to join in."

Just then, she caught sight of Bretton at the edge of the wall, his arms out and his face a mask of concentration as he drew in moisture

from the air to become part of the barrier.

“Bretton,” she called as they neared. The Ice Fae glanced up from his work. He quickly let down his hands and the wall ceased to grow. “We need to talk.”

“J  
ak,” he said in a booming voice, his eyes welcoming her

with a warmth that did not match his Fae abilities. “I’m glad to see you up and walking about.”

“I’m feeling much better,” said Jak, though it was only partially true. Her chest ached, and her leg was going to give way soon if she did not sit down again. But at least she could move.

“What can I do for you?” said Bretton.

“Well, have you ever linked before?”

Jak told him about her conversation with Girwirt and Noralim, and about how linking worked. Most humans couldn’t link, and she couldn’t since receiving the Void brand, but Fae could link with other Fae. And perhaps that would give them the knowledge they needed to save themselves on this frozen rock.

“I must admit, I knew nothing of this link before you said something,” said Bretton. “I’d be willing to give it a try with the gnome if it’s alright with him. After all, we seem to share a common element regarding our Fae abilities.”

Girwirt narrowed his eyes. “I’m not sure I want someone who can freeze me solid with a touch to...”

“Oh don’t worry about that, Girwirt, give it a shot.” Jak literally pushed Girwirt forward so he was standing closer to Bretton. For a brief moment, there was an awkward silence.

“I’m afraid you will have to show me how it’s done, little gnome,” said Bretton. “You have the experience after all.”

“Oh,” Girwirt seemed taken aback. “Well it’s no trouble, really. All you do is clasp hands,” he reached one arm forward, and Bretton immediately took the smaller fist in his. “Then you just open up.”

“I’m not sure what you mean?” said Bretton, his eyebrows drawn together.

“It’s really simple, once you get the hang of it,” said Noralim. “Girwirt, why don’t you initiate the link this time so he can understand how it feels?”

Girwirt shrugged but said nothing. Just a few moments later

Bretton's eyes widened. "Well, now that is interesting," he said. "Utterly fascinating."

"What is it?" Jak asked, eager to know more. What would it be like to link with an Ice Fae? "There's something there," said Girwirt, his own eyes open wide. "Something to do with the air."

"Yes, I see that," said Bretton, concentrating. "The wind and air is determined by shifts in temperature. Perhaps with the Ice Fae and gnomes together, we could..."

"We could change the weather," said Girwirt. His eyes grew even wider, and he let go of Bretton. All trace of his more cynical side was gone. "We would have control over the elements."

Jak's mind began racing. Okay, so perhaps the Ice Fae were some kind of missing link, one that could help them normalize the weather patterns here. It was something for sure, even though it still wouldn't help them with the food situation, other than maybe generate an environment more friendly to mushrooms.

"Okay," she said. "I think we should get some of the other Fae in on this. The Sky Fae will certainly be interested in helping, and we should have at least one troll as well, to provide you with any additional energy that you might need. In fact, we might as well have all the Fae link."

"For what purpose?" said Bretton. "To change the weather? If it gets too warm, the barrier will melt."

"If it gets warm enough, we won't need it," said Jak. "And it's not just for us. This planet is unfinished. We need you to heal it." Bretton raised his arms, palms outward. "Well I'm willing to help. But I'm not sure we'll be able to do much, considering you won't be able to guide the link, and you don't have the Pillars of Eternity like you did last time." "I know, but the Fae haven't needed a human for their link to work. Dwarves and gnomes have been doing it for generations to make armor, weapons, and such. We should at least be able to improve the climate."

Girwirt was looking far more excitable than usual, especially considering he had been willing to let himself die not long before. "Well, this can only mean one thing," he said.

"What's that, Girwirt," asked Noralim.

"I'm going to need some mushrooms."



AFTER THE GNOME ate his fill of mushrooms, or as much as they could spare anyway, Jak called a meeting of the council just outside the caves. Skellig, Seph, Mosaial, Li, and herself represented the different

groups of humans, while Viona, Yewin, Girwirt, Noralim, Perchel, Rael, and Bretton represented the Shadow Elves, Bright Elves, gnomes, dwarves, Sky Fae, trolls, and Ice Fae respectively. Last to arrive was Amelia, pulled along by several humans in her water-bearing wagon.

Jak couldn't help but smile as she saw her friend pulled into view. It had been so long since she had talked to Amelia.

"You know what I never thought I'd say?" Amelia said, leaning over the edge of her wagon as it approached. "That I actually miss the cold air. It gets stuffy in there."

"You got to watch the fight," Jak pointed out.

"Yeah, and it was pretty brutal from what I could see, probably worse than I thought, now that I can see all the colors of the rainbow on your face."

Jak chuckled, feeling her spirits lifting already. But that quickly faded as she caught sight of Viona's face. The Shadow Elf was not smiling, and it didn't take long for Amelia to notice as well, quickly stopping her mirth. What had happened to Vander was not a laughing matter, and no one knew that more than the Shadow Elves.

"Apologies, Viona," said Jak, then waited for a nod before continuing. "I asked all of you to come here because we need to talk about the Ice Fae."

She then went on to explain about the importance of the link, and how the Ice Fae might be able to help heal the weather patterns on the planet, when connected to the gnomes, Sky Fae, and other races.

"It sounds promising," said Yewin. "Though honestly not what I expected you to talk to us about."

"What did you expect?" said Jak.

"Well, I thought you were going to talk about those portals that keep popping up. We had some Sky Fae report of several more instances nearby. The demons that fell out of those portals haven't reached us yet, but we'll need to be ready."

Jak blinked. She had all but forgotten about the portals. She had been too caught up in trying to save everyone from the elements that any other concerns fell by the wayside. But in a way, it was the more important concern, if not the most immediate.

"Very well, I had an idea about that a while back, before my fight with Vander. We can talk about it, assuming the rest of you are willing to try linking with Bretton and the other Ice Fae?"

Yewin nodded, "I think I speak on behalf of all the Fae that we are willing to do so. Perhaps we could even set up a regular time for it. We might not be able to change the weather overnight after all."

The others nodded, so Jak continued. "I'm excited to see what becomes of it. In any case, concerning the portals, the last time they appeared, Bretton managed to hold one open for a limited time using

his Fae magic. Unfortunately, it allowed more demons to come through, but I'm wondering if we couldn't do the same to send people back."

That got a lot of interested looks. But Skellig looked troubled. "We've talked about this before, Jak," she said. "Surely if you came to the other side, you'd run into a horde of demons, and Cain himself. You'd have no chance against them with no brands."

"So we get past them unseen," said Jak, and looked pointedly at Viona.

The Shadow Elf started as she realized that all eyes had turned to her. "Oh no, you can't expect one of us to go?" she said. "After everything we've done to the rest of you?"

"That was mostly Vander's doing," said Yewin, rubbing his chin. "But it could work. You have the ability to disguise others who are not Shadow Elves, correct?"

"Well yes, but not more than one or two others. And it takes a great deal of concentration. But beyond that, we're in disarray right now. I could barely afford to send one of the others, let alone myself."

"You're the one I trust most, right now," said Jak, keeping her gaze fixed on the elf. "And perhaps the others would see it as a sign that we don't hold any ill will against you. That we're willing to continue to work together to meet our goals. Besides, Karlona dispatched several Shadow Elves as spies back on Earth, and they're still there. We could use this as an opportunity to retrieve them."

Viona met her eyes, and took a disparaging breath. "Well, I suppose it could be possible to hide you from the eyes of Cain and the demons once we're on the other side. I could cover no more than two, so unless you want to take more Shadow Elves with you..."

"We wouldn't have the time for that," said Bretton. "My estimation is that we could only keep the portal open for a few seconds, just enough time for a small handful to get through."

"I still don't like it," said Skellig. "Even if you made it to the other side, and managed to avoid getting caught by Cain, what would you do there?"

Jak had several answers prepared for this question. "Well, the first and foremost goal would be to retake the Pillars of Eternity, which would ultimately stop Cain from opening the portals here."

"Not an easy task," said Skellig, folding her arms.

"No, which is why we may need help. Naem is still there, and he's likely been recruiting more and more people this whole time. He might not even know we left."

"If he's still alive," said Skellig. "With us out of the way, and the Pillars of Eternity in his possession, who's to say Cain hasn't already laid waste to the entire planet by now?" Jak almost scowled. Leave it



to Skellig to find the worst case scenarios.

“He won’t destroy everything. I know him. He wants something left to command, to rule. But maybe you’re right, and maybe Naem won’t be waiting for us when we get back. If that’s the case then we’ll pick up where he left off, form a rebellion against Cain until we can take back what we lost.”

Skellig didn’t say anything that time, but her face was still dark.

“Look at it this way,” said Jak. “If we stay here and do nothing, Cain will eventually gain complete control over the Pillars and we won’t stand a chance. The increase in demons here shows that he’s getting closer to his goal. If there is any possibility, even the slightest, that we can stop that from happening, we have to take it.”

That was all Skellig needed. She pressed her lips together and nodded. “I suppose you’re right. But there’s a lot we simply cannot plan for, seeing as we have no idea where you will end up, or what Cain has been doing this whole time.”

“I agree,” said Jak. “Which is just another reason why only a few of us should go. A large force will have little advantage. With myself and Viona, that would mean no more than one additional person should come with us.

“I’ll go,” said Li immediately.

Jak glanced at the woman and hesitated. The eastern leader’s illness had not worsened over the past few days, but it had also not improved. Her skin was a pale greenish color, and she leaned against Amelia’s wagon for support. But her eyes were made of steel.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea, Li.” said Bretton. It should probably be one of the Fae, or at least someone with a powerful brand.

“From everything I’ve heard, brands will do little against Cain,” said Li. “And if there is to be rebelling, I want to be in the center of it. No one understands rebels and fighting against tyrants like I do.” Her voice was strong, contrasting starkly with her appearance.

Jak almost hid her smile. “Li, I think you’re right. Your experience with the eastern rebellions will matter more than something like a combat brand. Are you sure you’re up to the trip? You don’t look well.”

“I am well enough,” said Li, standing straight. “This illness is not like that which plagues the others. It has lasted long but I am still capable. I would be honored to accompany you.”

“Then I will not say no,” Jak exchanged a nod with the woman. “Assuming no one else has any objections?”

“I don’t suppose you want me to come as well?” said Seph from where he stood next to her. She swallowed as his gray eyes met hers. He was her husband, and if they could pull this off, she would be

leaving him. Was that fair?

Wisely, the others remained quiet, only watching as Jak and Seph exchanged glances.

“Seph, I...” she began.

“It’s okay, Jak,” he said, putting out a hand. “I understand that my strengths are to comfort and inspire. I’m needed here, to put the rest of us back together again, to heal. I’m not a rebel leader,” he waved a hand at Li, “or a cunning Fae,” he waved his other hand at Viona. “And I’m not you, Jak.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, simply. It seemed she was saying that a lot lately, but she didn’t know what else to say. Her marriage to Seph had given her the strength she needed to pull through her fight with Vander, to keep herself from giving into despair. What did it mean now that she was going to leave him so soon?

“Don’t be,” he replied. “I fully support the plan.”

Jak blinked at him. Well he could at least show a small amount of concern for her.

“That still leaves the question,” said Mosaial, his slow, southern accent easing the tension generated by Jak and Seph’s exchange. “We don’t know when or where these portals will appear. How do we find one to use as a way back to Earth?”

“It may take some time,” said Jak. “Viona, Li, and I will have to be ready to go at any moment. It’s likely that they will revisit us again soon.”

“So we wait?” said Yewin.

Jak nodded, “we wait.”

They spent a bit more time discussing the particulars, but it

wasn't long before Jak dismissed the council. Only Seph remained after everyone else returned to their duties. Jak met his eyes. "Would you like to take a walk for a bit?"

He smiled, though there was a hint of sadness in it. "I'd like that."

They left the camp, heading along the mountains to the west. Jak gently slipped her hand in his as they walked. Not far away there was a cliff face that provided a small measure of protection against the snow, enough so it was mostly dry at the base. It was the most private place she could think of, assuming no scouts were hurrying past.

"Seph, I hope you don't think that I'm abandoning you," she said after a minute or so of walking in the snow. "Getting married to you was the best decision I've ever made, and I don't regret it at all. You give me new life."

She looked sidelong at her husband, who gazed back. He was smiling. "I don't think that, Jak."

"You don't seem very worried about what might happen to me."

He took a deep breath. "Jak, of course I'm worried. But I also agreed to this the moment I agreed to marry you. We do not live in peaceful times, and I think both of us are destined for great things. But in a way, that is comforting."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I do not know where our lives will take us. We might both die in the fight for the Fae and for Illadar, you've certainly come close to it. But on the other hand, we've made it this far, and I can't help but think that if our destiny is to help people, we can't exactly do that when we're dead."

Jak thought that through. "I don't know, Seph. There was a moment when Vander was hitting me, that I realized my life could still count for something even after I was dead."

"But then you didn't die, did you?" he pointed out. "And why was that? What kept you going?"

She turned her head to look at him. "You did."

“See? As long as we hold out for others, our destinies are clear.”

“But I would have died had Girwirt not saved me.”

He shook his head, “You’re not giving yourself enough credit. After all, why would Girwirt step in like that if he didn’t believe in you as well?”

“You sound confident.”

“Perhaps. I don’t feel that way all the time, though. Only when I think it through. To be honest, I worry about the future as much as any man. I worry about Cain, about what could happen to you if you went back to Earth. Like I worried when Vander was pummeling you to death. It doesn’t ever go away.”

She wrapped one arm around his waist as they walked. “I’m sorry to put you through all of that.”

“I appreciate that, but you’re forgetting something,” he grinned at her, and she felt her face flush at the look in his eyes.

“What’s that?”

“You make it all worth it. All the times I worry about you, it’s only because I’ve come to care. And I wouldn’t care, if I didn’t love you with all my heart.”

They were approaching the foothills. Jak could see the dark rock at its base where the snow hadn’t touched. Even though they were still walking, she placed her head on his shoulder. “Thank you for loving me, Seph.”

“And thank you for loving me. When you finally make it back to Earth, let that be what brings you back safely.”

Jak nodded, simply enjoying his presence as they made it to the cliff. There they sat on a small, rocky ledge. She simply let him hold her, enjoying the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

“I will come back, Seph. I promise.”

“I know,” Seph kissed her gently on the lips. She responded by grabbing him by the back of the head and kissing him hard, harder than she had ever kissed him before. It was a kiss of passion, a promise that she would not abandon him, that she would come back if for no other reason than to be with him again.

She continued to kiss him long into the night, the warmth of their bodies making up for the cooling temperatures. Her love for Seph boiled over, and she saw stars. It was a feeling not unlike what she had felt when creating Illadar. It was the power of the love they shared, the power of creation, the power of eternity. Finally, they could enjoy a little privacy together as husband and wife.



OVER THE NEXT TWO DAYS, Jak, Li, and Viona prepared what weapons and belongings they needed, and the Fae had begun practicing regular links. They claimed it was working, though Jak couldn't really see much of a result, other than the fact that the wind had picked up a bit. But that could mean anything.

Regardless, it was a way for her to help the Fae feel valued. Vander would likely have looked on it as yet another exploitation of their skills, but Jak saw it more as a celebration. It was bringing out the best in each of them, and together they were learning more about the world they inhabited, and their own abilities.

The only downside to their preparations was the fact that Jak had to be near Viona and Li at all times, which meant that she and Seph never got another private moment together. But they couldn't afford the time it would take to rally everyone together once the portals appeared. They had to stay close.

Regardless of their lack of privacy, Seph remained with her at all times, never wanting to leave her alone for an instant, knowing that she could disappear at a moment's notice. And Jak loved him for it.

They spent most of their time talking, and making plans for their future. They talked about things that had seemed silly just days ago, such as the number of kids they wanted, or the house they would build. None of that would be possible, of course, until their current crisis was dealt with, but Seph had a way of inspiring hope, especially when it came to life on Illadar.

When the portals finally came again, they were ready for them. No less than four days after Jak had discussed the plan with the council, she woke to shouts coming from nearby.

Instantly she was awake, and on her feet. Seph blinked his eyes as he awoke, but quickly followed Jak once he realized what was happening.

"Portals!" Bretton yelled. "The portals are opening just to the east side of camp."

Li and Viona were awake and beside Jak in a heartbeat, carrying the packs they had prepared earlier. Jak grabbed her own, and with a tilt of her head at Li and Viona, she began running to the east side of camp. She spared a glance for Seph, who joined them but lagged several steps behind.

She quickly caught sight of Bretton, who was waving them forward at the edge of the camp. He pointed and Jak could see the strange purple energy coming off the portals in the moonlight.

"If we hurry, we can make it in time." said Bretton, falling into step with them as they approached.

"We're ready," said Li, though she was breathing hard from the exertion. Had Jak made the wrong decision to allow her to come? She

was sick after all. But then again, a sick person was likely better off on Earth, than here on Illadar.

They continued running, all five of them while others gathered to watch them go. Soon, they had passed up all the onlookers and Jak could see the portals far more clearly. One or two dark shapes against the snow suggested there were already demons that had dropped through the portals, or at least parts of them. But they didn't have time to worry about them right now.

As soon as they were close enough, Bretton extended his hands. Jak's face protested as the air grew chill. The Ice Fae's magic shot from his arms until it connected with the nearest portal to open in front of them.

The portal froze in mid air, just large enough for one person to climb through at a time.

"Go!" Bretton screamed at them. His gray face was pinched with effort, and his white hair flew about his neck with the wind. But he was standing strong, holding the portal open for them.

"Hold my hand!" said Viona, extending both for Jak and Li to grab hold of. They did so.

Jak took one last look back, to see Seph standing next to Bretton, his face a mask of concern, but also something of encouragement. He smiled and nodded. Jak nodded back. She would see him again. If she had to pry the Pillars of Eternity off of Cain's dead corpse, she would see that man again.

In a flash, she felt the magic of the Shadow Elf wash over her. Glancing down at her hand, she saw nothing but air. She couldn't see Viona or Li either, though she knew they were there. Viona's hand still held hers, tightly.

"Hold it as long as you can, Bretton!" she yelled, before pulling on Viona's hand, moving directly for the portal.

She reached it and stepped through, pulling her companions after her.

## Epilogue

Naem ran down the ruined passage that had once been mainstreet in Skyecliff. There was nothing left of it now, not since Cain and his demons had reduced it to rubble. Now only the Royal Palace remained intact, and he had no idea what was going on in there. It was nothing short of impossible how Skyecliff had fallen so fast. Many, or at least those who were still alive, speculated that the queen had even let it happen. Naem didn't speculate.

But right now, none of that mattered. Right now, he was running for his life.

No less than fifty demons were on his heel, some of them close enough to take a few swipes at his feet as he ran. Grace was a wonderful brand in combat and situations like these, but it also did not grant him any additional speed. What he wouldn't give for that Pillar of Eternity he had used back on the plains near Riverbrook. That had been an experience like none other.

But Jak needed that, so he would have to make do.

He jabbed his spear blindly behind him, and was rewarded with a satisfying yelp as the spear tip slashed at a demon. But he had to keep running. If he didn't lead this pack far enough away, they would double back and kill the refugees he had found on the south side of the city.

He ducked around a corner and nearly collided with Geram, a fellow Watcher who had listened to Naem and stayed behind after Skyecliff had been decimated. They had stayed to get as many survivors out as they could. Naem threw his arms up in front of him but only just managed to avoid a collision. But the damage had been done. He turned and swung his spear down, just in time to stop a demon from biting into his leg. The rest of the demons crowded around, barely slowing their momentum as they rounded the same corner.

"I've got them, Naem." said Geram, raising his own spear, and lighting up his Telekinesis brand. That's right, Geram was a Telekinetic. Naem turned his attention back to the demons and began

taking out as many as he could. At this close range, and with this many demons, it was dangerous to take them on alone. But Geram began holding back several using his brand, and Naem moved in for the kill.

He took out the first wave, dodging and twisting, aided by his brand of Grace. Geram crushed several demons, and held others for Naem to finish with his spear. He was honestly surprised at how much strength Geram seemed to have with Telekinesis. Few of his brand could hold that many demons back at once.

Working together, it wasn't long before all the demons lay dead at their feet. Naem almost laughed as he caught his breath. That had been a close one.

"Thank you, Geram," he said, turning to the Watcher and clasping him by the hand. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't shown up."

"I was looking for you anyway, Naem." Geram responded, not sharing the same look of relief that Naem felt.

"Oh yeah?"

"My master wants to speak to you."

Naem frowned. His who? What was...

But then Geram seemed to shimmer. His entire visage changed in the blink of an eye, going from the thick-set Watcher Naem had recruited, to a tall, thin boy Naem recognized.

"Marek?" he said, his jaw dropping. "But how? You died at Foothold." This had to be a dream, or some strange nightmare.

"It matters not," said Marek, his voice darker than Naem remembered.

He narrowed his eyes at the boy. "What have you done to Geram?"

"There never was a Geram. I have been watching you from the beginning. You were the only other to successfully wield a Pillar of Eternity."

He took one step forward, advancing on Naem. Despite himself, Naem took a step back.

"And now, he wants to learn how you did it."



## **Author's Note**

Well then, that's not quite as bad of a cliffhanger, is it? I know several people were upset with where I left off at the end of book 5, but hopefully this one isn't so bad. Jak has a plan, she's managed to keep her people alive, and if there's anyone who can get her powers back after a Void brand, it's Jak.

But will she ever get the use of her brands back? That still remains to be seen, and I encourage you to continue reading to find out.

This book took a little extra time to release. Believe it or not, I had the first draft written nearly six months ago, but waited to release it until because of a combination of editor schedules, and the fact that....I GOT MARRIED!

That's right, I was married on February 22nd, 2019, to the love of my life. We spent three amazing weeks in New Zealand (I know, right!?), before coming back home and starting our new life together.

So naturally I've been a little preoccupied and I hope you will forgive me of that. The good news is, the remaining two books in this series are already written, and only await editing. They will arrive very soon.

I can't thank you enough for having read this far. Jak has long been a character in the back of my mind, ever since I was roughly seventeen. I've enjoyed putting her achievements down on paper, and I can't wait for you to read the rest.

Best wishes, and may you enjoy the next bit as much as I enjoyed writing it.

**The Story Continues In...**



# JASON HAMILTON

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## About the Author

Jason Hamilton is an unapologetic nerd of all things science fiction and fantasy. He is the author of multiple fantasy series, as well as the Creative Director of the **Arthurian Legends Universe**.

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